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Integrating Production-Oriented Approach and Project-Based Learning in College English Teaching: A Case Study from an Application-Oriented University

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Abstract

This paper demonstrates a teaching practice case of integrating the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) with Project-Based Learning (PBL) in college English instruction at an application-oriented university, which can be explicitly illustrated through a six-period teaching unit themed "To Be a Citizen". This study shows how POA's "motivating-enabling-assessing" framework can give structured pedagogical support inside PBL's project-driven learning cycle. The integrated model goes to the challenge of balancing student autonomy in PBL with the need for systematic skill scaffolding in language teaching by means of blended learning and teaching embedded design, peer-assessment mechanisms, as well as multi-dimensional evaluation. This approach aims to enhance students' news writing competence, critical thinking skills as well as civic awareness. The case analysis reveals that POA-PBL integration provides a practicable pathway for application-oriented universities seeking to combine outcome-based language instruction with authentic feasible project experiences. Practical implications and limitations are also discussed for future implementation.

Subject Areas

Pedagogy

Keywords

Production-Oriented Approach, Project-Based Learning, College English Teaching, Application-Oriented University, Critical Thinking

1. Introduction

The landscape of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching in higher education has undergone significant transformation in recent years, particularly within application-oriented universities that emphasize practical competence alongside linguistic proficiency [1]. Professor Wen Qiufang puts forward that the production-oriented approach has already formed into a quite influential teaching framework, and teachers in language teaching employ it to carry out fixed work on language input and output. Its core philosophy concentrates on producing to carry out learning, with a three-phase teaching process (motivating, enabling, and assessing) widely adopted across various English courses in Chinese universities [1].

Project-based learning in higher education draws quite some attention and works as one approach to improving students' class engagement and cultivating competence, especially in collaborative problem-solving and critical thinking through authentic learning experiences (Krauss and Boss 2013) [2]. PBL carries out the focus on those real-world assignments and autonomous learning ability, which exactly fits the competency goals that application-oriented universities aim at. Therefore, integrating PBL into language teaching will inevitably bump into obstacles, among which how to make changeable project exploration and getting language skills developed systematically stand out in practice.

Recently scholars have recognized the complementary connection between POA and PBL. Sun (2019) claimed that PBL teaching design that centers on project could align well with POA structured teaching phases in practical training courses for language teaching [3].

In spite of growing interest in POA-PBL integration, few studies have provided specific classroom implementations with detailed instructional designs, particularly for non-English-major students in application-oriented universities. This paper targets this gap and develops out a quite full teaching case integrating the POA approach into PBL learning in a college English teaching unit themed "To Be a Citizen". This case shows explicitly how the framework of POA (motivating, enabling, and assessing) can work out to provide scaffolding structure in the PBL project cycle, offering a replicable model for instructors at similar institutions.

The objectives of this paper are in three dimensions: first, to propose a theoretical framework for POA-PBL integration in college English teaching; second, to present a detailed instructional design that carries out this integration; and third, to discuss practical implications, observed outcomes, and limitations for future practice.

2. Literature Review

2.1. The Production-Oriented Approach: Theory and Practice

POA was put forward as a response to the long-existing problem of "separation of learning and using" inside China's EFL education, just as Wen (2017) pointed out [4]. Its theoretical framework is constructed by three mutually linked parts, including teaching principles, teaching hypotheses, and teacher-mediated teaching process. The whole process can be divided into three phases: motivating, enabling,

and assessing.

In the motivating phase, the teacher provides real communicative scenarios for students to recognize the gap between their current language competence and the target production task as a means to activate their curiosity and stimulate their internal learning motivation for learning outcomes. The enabling phase counts as the core part of POA teaching. The teacher carefully prepared the selected input materials, scaffolding activities, and structured guidance to help students absorb the knowledge and skills necessary for the complete production task. In the assessing phase, teacher evaluation, AI guidance, and peer assessment are all involved to get formative feedback that can be used to guide production revision and improvement.

Researches on POA implementation in recent years has expanded quickly. Sun and Asmawi (2021) reviewed a series of POA studies in China and confirmed the effectiveness of this approach in improving students' writing quality, oral proficiency, as well as overall language competence [5]. Qiu (2020) provided detailed theoretical principles for the enabling phase, emphasizing the importance of well-prepared input, progressive scaffolding, and diagnostic assessment [6]. Cheng (2025) also proved that the integration of POA and blended learning modes can effectively put moral education as well as key competency cultivation into language learning and teaching [7].

However, POA also receives criticism for its relatively teacher-centered orientation as well as possible rigid procedural structure. Some scholars ponder that whether POA's emphasis on teacher mediation will or not restrain the development of students' learning autonomy and creative expression in language production (Sun, 2020) [8]. This concern theoretically provides the opening to carry out the integration of POA with more student-centered approaches like PBL.

2.2. Project-Based Learning in Language Education

PBL is one instructional methodology, that pulls students into the realm of extended real-world projects that require inquiry, collaboration and the creation of tangible products (Krauss & Boss, 2013) [2]. In language education contexts, PBL already gets proven that it is conducive to the promotion of communicative competence, critical thinking skills as well as the motivation of language learning (Song *et al.*, 2025) [9].

The core features of PBL include: a driving question or problem that anchors the project; sustained inquiry that gets carried out over an extended period; students' ideas and choices in project direction; collaboration among peers; and the creation of a public product that demonstrates learning. These features contrast with traditional language instruction, and often prioritize discrete skill practice over authentic language use.

The implementation of PBL in EFL contexts will meet several challenges. Yang and Deris (2023) noted that students who possess limited language proficiency may struggle with the open-ended nature of PBL tasks, since the whole process

needs extra scaffolding to get the task completed [10]. What's more, the lack of structured skill instruction in pure PBL models can influence the language accuracy due to project completion pressures. These limitations suggest that PBL may benefit from the integration with other structured pedagogical frameworks.

2.3. Complementarity of POA and PBL

The complementary relationship between POA and PBL has been increasingly noticed by scholars. They find out that POA provides systematic skill instruction, clear assessment criteria, and teacher-mediated guidance, which can prevent PBL from becoming unstructured or with shallow content. By contrast, PBL provides authentic learning contexts, student autonomy, collaborative problem-solving, and extended project engagement that can prevent POA from becoming rigid or teacher-directed. Sun (2019) demonstrated this complementarity in a practical training course for English majors, where POA's teaching phases were used to structure a PBL-based curriculum design [3].

The integration of POA and PBL is particularly meaningful for application-oriented universities due to its necessity for the balance between practical competency development and systematic knowledge instruction. These institutions emphasize the cultivation of applied talents who can transfer classroom learning to real-world contexts, and it's a goal that aligns with both the output orientation POA and the project authenticity of PBL.

3. Theoretical Framework: The POA-PBL Integrated Model

Based on the complementary strengths identified, this study proposes a POA-PBL integrated model for college English teaching in application-oriented universities. The model can be illustrated in Figure 1 and described in the following parts.

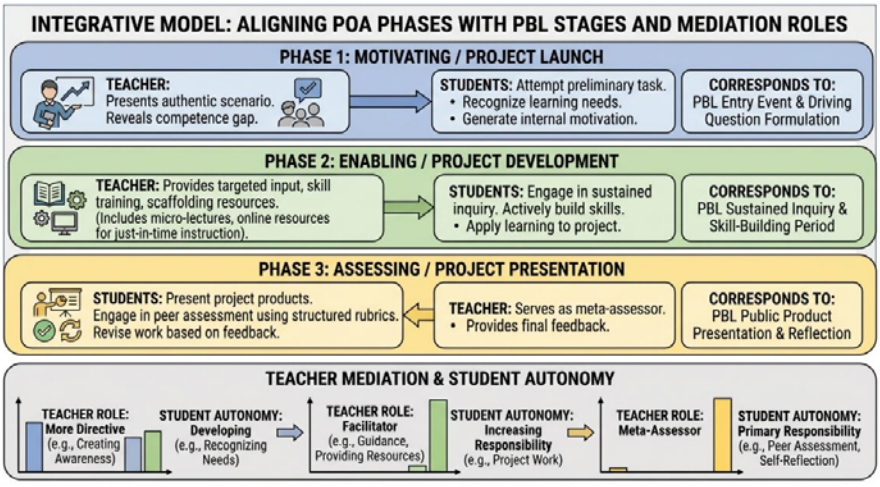


Figure 1. Theoretical framework: The POA-PBL integrated model.

3.1. Structural Integration

The POA-PBL model underlies POA's three-phase teaching process within PBL's

project cycle. The project creates the learning context, and POA's different phases provide structured pedagogical support at each period of project development to make up the whole implementation. This integration creates a double-layer instructional design: the macro-layer (PBL) centers on the project timeline, driving question, and final product; the micro-layer (POA) focuses on the teaching and learning instruction during every project stage. In the whole process, the two layers are not parallel, but a developmental process of mutual support and improvement of two pedagogical methodologies.

3.2. Phase Alignment

The model carries out the alignment work of POA's three phases with PBL's project stages in the following way:

Phase 1: Motivating/Project Launch. The teacher creates scenarios related to the project theme and figures out the gap between students' current language proficiency and the project's production requirements. Then students start with a preliminary production task, recognize their learning needs, and consequently activate their internal motivations. This phase corresponds to PBL's project entry and driving question.

Phase 2: Enabling/Project Development. The teacher provides input materials, both online and offline, skill training activities, and scaffolding resources to support students' project processing. This phase grounds PBL's sustained inquiry, as well as skill-building period. What's more, the integration of micro-lectures and online learning resources can also enable students to master just-in-time skill instruction.

Phase 3: Assessing/Project Presentation. Students present their project outcomes, engage themselves in peer assessment, and refine their work based on those feedback from both teachers, students and AI assistants. This is the phase corresponding to PBL's public product presentation and student reflection in part.

3.3. Teacher Mediation and Student Autonomy

The model addresses the tension between teacher guidance and student autonomous learning capability by identifying their respective roles across different phases. In the motivating phase, the teacher plays a more enlightening role in cultivating students' awareness of the necessity of learning. While in the enabling phase, the teacher changes to a facilitator, who provides resources and guidance to help students take more and more responsibility for their tasks. Then in the assessing phase, students make evaluations through peer assessment and self-reflection, and the teacher correspondingly transits to a meta-assessor.

4. Teaching Design and Implementation

4.1. Context and Participants

The teaching case was implemented in a College English course (among students whose language proficiency is at about CET-4 level) at an application-oriented

university in Zhejiang, China (Zhejiang Yuexiu University of Foreign Languages) to testify the instructional feasibility and learning outcomes. The participants were 135 first-year undergraduate students from different majors covering Journalism, Exhibition Economy and Management, International Journalism and Communication. The teaching unit was based on Unit 3, "To Be a Citizen," from the textbook New College English Integrated Course 2 (Second Edition). The unit was composed of six class periods (three sessions of two periods each) and centered on the core project task: "Find and report on an unsung hero."

4.2. Teaching Objectives

The teaching objectives were designed as follows:

Knowledge input: Students are able to accurately explain the inverted pyramid structure and its four core components (namely headline, lead, body, ending); be able to list the 5W1H elements of news writing and know how to make distinguish between news facts and personal opinions.

Skills acquiring: Students are able to put into practice the inverted pyramid structure and 5W1H elements to write an English news report, with information organized from most to least important; be able to use a structured peer-assessment checklist to evaluate classmates' news reports and refine their own drafts according to the feedback.

Values shaping: By reporting on unsung heroes, students are able to perceive the civic responsibility and values shown by the reported individual; be able to evaluate their own contribution and growth in the project and identify the space for future improvement.

4.3. Student Analysis and Challenges

Students acquire basic reading and writing skills at CET-4 level, but news writing experience is still limited. Key challenges identified lie in: students' unfamiliarity with the inverted pyramid structure, difficulty in telling facts from opinions, and the lack of information-sorting ability to organize content by its importance. In addition, students were accustomed to digital learning and always showed a preference for interactive, participatory learning content.

4.4. Teaching Process

The teaching process exactly followed the POA-PBL integrated model across three phases, where each phase matched two class periods.

Phase 1: Motivating and Project Launch (Periods 1 - 2)

Activities: The session started with the English song "Another Day in Paradise" to wake students' civic awareness and the introduction to the bystander effect. Students discussed the reason why people often fail to act when others are in trouble, and answer the motivation question of "why we need to report heroes." Students then read the text "Crowds Without Heroes," accomplish the information extraction table to learn about the report, including characters, events, time, place,

and bystander reactions. Students discussed what inspired people to act and defines "civic responsibility."

POA-PBL Integration: The song and reading text worked as the motivating scenario in POA, and initially revealed students' limited understanding of civic responsibility, as well as news writing principles. Simultaneously, these learning materials activate the PBL project by bringing in the motivation question—"How can we report on an unsung hero to make their story known?" Students were assigned the preliminary task of finding potential unsung heroes they know, and thereby formally initiated the project.

Evaluation: Assessment in this phase included class participation, a 50-word narrative with 5W1H elements, reading comprehension table completion, and self-diagnosis through pre-class questions about prior knowledge of the bystander effect.

Phase 2: Enabling and Project Development (Periods 3 - 4)

Activities: In this phase, students shared with classmates their unsung hero candidates. The class read "Students Shed Light on a Holocaust Hero," a story about four high school students who researched and reported on Irena Sendler, and thereby provided students with a role model for the project. Students analyzed the text with 5W1H elements and examined its components one by one. The teacher re-emphasized the basic concept of the inverted pyramid structure and guided student groups to finish their reporting.

POA-PBL Integration: The enabling phase provided target skill instruction in the PBL project, in which the reading text worked out with dual purposes: as an enabling input for news structure analysis (POA) and as a role model that demonstrated the social value of news reporting (PBL).

Evaluation: Assessment covered class participation, 5W1H analysis accuracy, micro-lecture completion, and first draft submission.

Phase 3: Assessing and Project Implementation (Periods 5 - 6)

This phase focused on project implementation and product refinement. Students conducted peer assessment with structured checklists through the principle of inverted pyramid structure, 5W1H completeness, and fact-opinion differentiation. Based on peer feedback, students revised their drafts. This session ended with group presentations of final news reports and, together with their reflective journal writing.

4.5. Observed Outcomes

This case study adopts qualitative and descriptive data collection and analysis methods, relying on various data sources naturally generated during the teaching process. The main data sources include teachers' classroom observations, students' writing products in different sessions, peer review, and students' reflections. The students' written works make up the core analytical part of the study, including three consecutive output tasks: an initial 50-word narrative with 5W1H elements, a draft of a news report, and a final revised version. These writing sam-

ples were compared and analyzed among different drafts to track the development of students' news writing skills, especially their application of the inverted pyramid structure, as well as their ability to distinguish facts from viewpoints.

5. Observed Outcomes and Challenges

5.1. Observed Outcomes

By means of analyzing student work and classroom observations, the case revealed several explicit outcomes. Students' news writing capability showed significant improvement after the learning of the micro-lecture. All the students were able to rectify their final drafts by correctly applying the inverted pyramid structure. The peer assessment process strengthened students' analytical skills, and they became more capable of distinguishing between facts and opinions in both their own and others' news writing. The project context provided authentic motivation for language use, and students showed higher engagement compared to traditional writing assignments. The value education was naturally incorporated in the project theme by the progressive work of researching and reporting on unsung heroes. Students were consequently engaged with concepts of civic responsibility, active citizenship, and shifted deeds from abstract discussion to "Actions speak louder than words".

5.2. Challenges

In the process of implementation, several challenges emerged: some students struggled with the complexity of the project task, called for much clearer scaffolding and required to break the task into smaller and various phases; they also found difficulty in eliminating subjective expressions from their news writing, therefore demonstrating more urgent necessity of targeted feedback and practice exercises; what's more, well-coordinated group work required students of more careful management to ensure peer-participation.

6. Implementation and Limitations

6.1. Theoretical and Practical Implications

The POA-PBL integrated model demonstrates that the main concern between teacher-directed structure and student-centered autonomous learning can be productively resolved through careful teaching design. POA's "motivating-enabling-assessing" framework provides the procedural scaffolding that PBL often lacks, while PBL's real project experience provides the meaningful production that drives POA's motivating phase. This integration extends POA's basic framework by demonstrating its adaptability to project-based contexts. The model also adapts to a broader discussion of pedagogical innovation in Chinese EFL education. By associating a domestically developed approach (POA) with an internationally recognized methodology (PBL), the model in the case exemplifies the kind of innovation that application-oriented universities especially require. The model is likely

to confront the criticism, including POA may be overly teacher-directed, and addresses PBL's weakness in systematic skill acquisition through POA's enabling phase.

For instructors at application-oriented universities, the POA-PBL model offers several practical benefits. The structured teaching process cuts down the planning burden in PBL implementation, while POA provides a much clearer instructional framework. The model is adaptable to various courses. Instructors can replace the "unsung hero" project in the case with other tasks by integrating POA and PBL implementations.

6.2. Limitations

However, the acknowledgment of several limitations of this study should also be taken into consideration. First of all, the case was implemented in a single unit. The number of students involved is relatively small, which, as a result, limited the spread of findings. Secondly, the assessment outcomes were primarily qualitative. It was mostly based on teachers' observations and students' presentation analysis, rather than quantitative measures. Therefore, future research should employ larger sample sizes and mixed-methods assessment to provide more evidence of the model's effectiveness. Thirdly, the study didn't include a control group comparison, and it made it difficult to isolate the detailed effects of the POA-PBL integration from other methodologies.

7. Conclusion

This paper provides a teaching practice case of integrating the Production-Oriented Approach with Project-Based Learning in college English at an application-oriented university. The case demonstrates how POA's "motivating-enabling-assessing" framework can provide pedagogical scaffolding within PBL's project-driven learning process. This model works to address the limitations of each approach when they're applied independently. The findings suggest that POA-PBL integration offers a feasible pathway for application-oriented universities to balance systematic language skill instruction with real project-based learning. The model's double-layer implementation provides a replicable framework for instructors. PBL organizes the project timeline and POA constructs the classroom proceeding. Future research should explore the model's applicability from other facets, including course types, student populations, and different contexts. What's more, it's also necessary to employ larger-scale quantitative studies to testify its effectiveness.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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