

# An Action Research on POA-based ESP Textbook Writing

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**Abstract:** Current problems concerning compiling ESP textbooks include failing to meet students' practical needs or being unable to keep pace with the advancing times. Therefore an ESP textbook writing model suitable for Chinese learners is required. By using a "Teaching Theory-Action Research" Integrated Model, an action research on compiling *Spoken English for Occupational Purposes* based on the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) is conducted. This study focuses on the effective implementation of the POA teaching process by going through three stages of textbook writing. It is revealed that the POA theory facilitates the integration of learning and use and improves occupational English proficiency, thus providing a referential model for compiling ESP textbooks.

## 1. Introduction

To cultivate well-rounded talents that thrive in the globalization times, college English curriculum in Chinese higher education has been taking on reforms in the last decade. The focus of college English courses has been shifted from teaching language skills to improving students' communicative abilities in the global context through learning English for Specific Purposes (ESP). Driven by China's New Liberal Arts initiative where increasing cross-disciplinary programs were established in recent years, ESP is occupying a larger share of college English courses than in the past, and ESP teaching is emerging as a potential research focus.

It is crucial that teaching materials be carefully selected and tailored to meet curriculum objectives. ESP textbooks are no exception to this. Tomlinson<sup>[1]</sup> puts that the theory-based adaptation of teaching materials is more systematic, conducive to developing high-quality textbooks catering to learners' needs. Researchers look into the issue from both macro and micro perspectives. On the macro level, principles of compiling ESP textbooks are discussed<sup>[2,3]</sup>; on the micro level, researchers studied the linguistic features and the content of ESP textbooks<sup>[4-6]</sup>. ESP textbooks still face problems such as failing to meet students' practical needs or being unable to keep pace with the advancing times<sup>[7]</sup>, therefore an ESP textbook writing model suitable for Chinese learners is urgently required.

This study examines the case of writing *Spoken English for Occupational Purposes* (hereafter referred to as *SEOP*), which is the textbook used by an ESP course "English for Job Hunting" for undergraduates at a provincial-level key supported university.

## 2. Method

Chang<sup>[8]</sup> proposes a "Teaching Theory-Action Research" Integrated Model for textbook writing, which illustrates how the teaching theory (*i.e.* Production-Oriented Approach, abbreviated as POA) and the action research are interactively employed to ensure a more systematic and scientific pattern for compiling teaching materials.

As one of the most influential foreign language teaching theories with Chinese characteristics, POA maintains a "motivating—enabling—assessing" teaching process, positing a real-life output setting before knowledge input to boost students' active learning by making them beware of the gap between their language capacity and practical needs<sup>[9]</sup>. Both theoretical and applied studies on POA have increased to manifold in recent years, including POA-based textbook studies. However, textbooks and classroom instructions adopting POA remain insufficient for Chinese learners<sup>[10]</sup>.

This study adopts a "Teaching Theory-Action Research" Integrated Model containing three stages:

First draft—Sample unit—Whole book (Figure 1). The POA theory navigates the whole process of textbook writing. The action research in Stage 1 is student-dominant and done after class, and in Stages 2 & 3 the action research is conducted in classroom teaching practices following the procedures of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. Writing *SEOP* with this integrated model links language teaching theory and practice by examining how the POA-guided textbook design could be effectively implemented in ESP classrooms through action research.

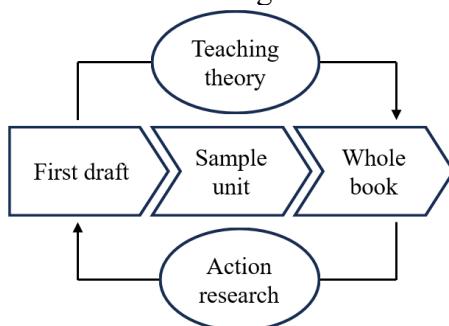


Figure 1 The “Teaching Theory-Action Research” Integrated Model

### 3. The Process of Writing *SEOP*

#### 3.1. Stage 1: First draft

The *SEOP* writing is guided by the *learner needs-driven* and *workplace-oriented* writing principles. Prior to drafting, 16 unit topics are chosen after sufficient needs analysis of both teachers and learners. In accordance with Krashen’s *i+1* hypothesis, the units are sequenced in an ascending order based on the overall readability levels of the input video scripts of each unit (Table 1).

Table 1 Topics of 16 units in *SEOP*

UNIT	TOPIC	UNIT	TOPIC	UNIT	TOPIC	UNIT	TOPIC
1	Self-assessment and career goals	5	Job promotion	9	Business trips	13	Networking and connections
2	Career changes	6	Compensation and benefits	10	Job offers	14	Business reports and presentations
3	Business negotiations	7	Business reception	11	Onboarding	15	Upskilling for future jobs
4	Job interviews	8	Job fairs	12	Corporate culture	16	Customer relationships

Next comes the most difficult step: to construct a POA-based framework of a single unit. To demonstrate the “motivating—enabling—assessing” process, the unit design centers around an output task in real-life occupational settings. Table 2 illustrates the POA-based framework of the sample unit “Job interviews.”

Table 2 Framework of Unit 4 “Job interviews”

POA phase	Section	Activities	Design purposes
Motivating	Objectives	- Introducing the main character and the scenario in this unit: “ <i>In this unit, Wei Lin attends an on-campus training program for job interviews to get herself more prepared.</i> ”	Setting the communicative context Setting learning goals
		- Clarifying the dimensions for assessment: <i>learn how to 1) prepare for a job interview; 2) answer interview questions properly; 3) leave a good impression on the interviewers.</i>	
Enabling	Start-up	- Watch the video clip “A new grad’s job interview” to understand some inappropriate behaviors of a job candidate before and during an interview.	Content enabling Language enabling Structure enabling
	Input-oriented activities	- <b>Activity 1:</b> Watch the video clip “Preparing for a job interview” to get useful tips for interview preparation, e.g. be familiar with frequently-asked interview questions.	

		- <b>Activity 2:</b> Watch the video “How to answer situational interview questions” and learn to use the STAR method to address situational questions in a job interview.	
	<b>Speaking skills in the workplace</b>	- Supply the text material “How to sell your personal brand” as linguistic scaffolding for learners, enabling them with useful expressions to answer frequently-asked interview questions.	
<b>Assessing</b>	<b>Output-oriented activities</b>	- <b>Activity 1:</b> Refine the resume of a college graduate by correcting the mistakes highlighted. Learn the key strategies in writing a resume. - <b>Activity 2:</b> Role-play the interviewer and the interviewee in a mock job interview. Then reflect on the mock job interview, relating to the factors leading to a successful job interview.	Completing the task Assessing the task

After finishing the initial draft, the *SEOP* writing team invites a group of pilot students to use the textbook (*i.e.* complete the exercises individually) and give feedback. Altogether 25 students give feedback on the sample unit “Job interviews.” The data collected are divided into “Self-reflection” (reflecting on why they make mistakes) and “Suggestions” (giving suggestions on how the design of activities could be improved).

The cleaned “Self-reflection” data are coded into seven core categories, which are visually presented in Figure 2. It shows that the two main obstacles faced by the students are “Fast speech rate, difficulty in capturing information” (32%) and “Unclear pronunciation or heavy accent, difficulty in word recognition” (23%), totaling 55%. The results suggest that students’ listening skills are insufficient to cope with language variability in authentic communicative contexts, highlighting the gap between classroom listening practice and real-world language use. The next big challenges are “Unfamiliar topic and excessive new vocabulary hindering comprehension” (17%) and “Word known but misspelled” (10%), which unveil students’ lack of vocabulary and relevant background knowledge. Other factors affecting students’ performance are related with their interpretation of question instructions and their habits in doing listening exercises, taking up smaller proportions.

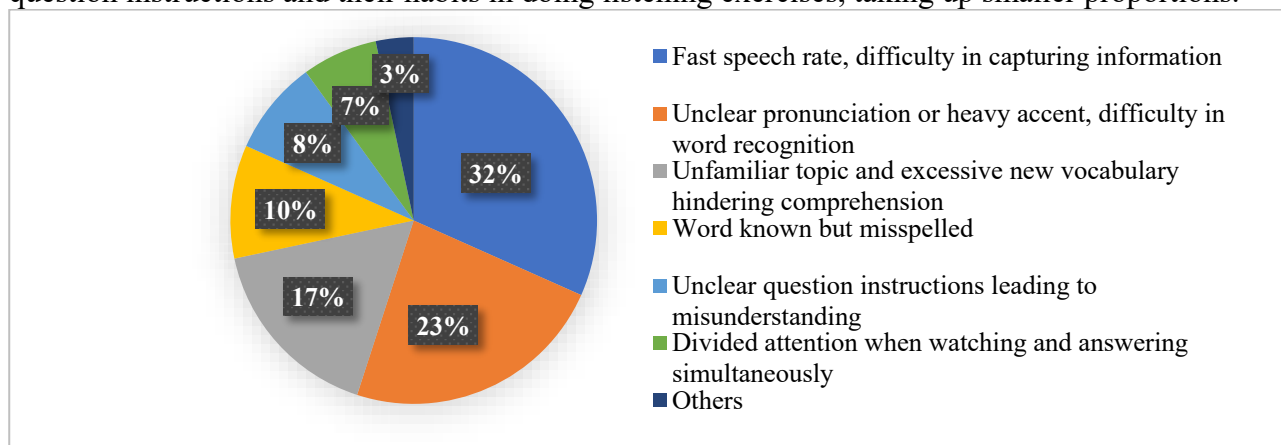


Figure 2 The percentage composition of “Self-reflection” data categories

The cleaned “Suggestions” data are coded into five core categories. The number of items under each category in descending order is: *adjust material difficulty* (9), *enhance question type variety* (6), *refine question wording* (5), *adjust question difficulty* (5), and *improve page design* (3).

Based on the feedback, the *SEOP* writing team makes reasonable improvements. For example, in Start-up, students only need to check the boxes of certain inappropriate interview behaviors mentioned in the video clip instead of making a list by themselves. Another example is when students are asked to capture the factors leading to a successful job interview in Input-oriented Activity 1, the question form shifts from note-taking to check-all-that-apply questions. These refinements function as content and language enabling, lowering the difficulty of the exercises.

Stage 1 shows the importance of action research in optimizing the POA-based textbook writing, which could immediately lessen the problem of incompatibility between teaching theory and practice. In the next stage, the study is going to test how well the “motivating—enabling—assessing” process

is done in language classrooms.

### 3.2. Stage 2: Sample unit

The implementation of the sample unit is carried out by Teacher Z in her “English for Job Hunting” class. The research team analyzes the classroom recordings provided by the university’s smart classroom platform carefully and collects Teacher Z’s feedback on textbook use. Generally speaking, the key sections in the sample unit could reflect the POA teaching process to certain extent, but still fail to meet the expectations of an effective ESP classroom.

The first main reason is the output task is not clearly stated in the motivating phase and students are not given the chance for their own production so that they are unaware of the language gap. This is solved by rewording the Objectives section to directly connect to the output task, “*In this unit, Wei Lin attends an on-campus training program to prepare for job interviews. She gains knowledge about resume writing for new college graduates and does a mock interview.*” In real classroom instructions, students could be allocated some time for production, such as talking about components of a resume, qualities of a well-written resume, job interview essentials, etc..

Secondly, reduce exercise difficulty by redirecting students’ attention from detailed understanding of the video clip to general comprehension supported by a well-structured outline or partially-provided scripts in the textbook. Some students say overemphasizing details makes them feel like taking a listening class which is too much pressure and frustrating. Additionally, the question focus is shifted to students’ familiar topics to better align with their cognitive levels.

Thirdly, intensify the speaking-skill practice in classroom teaching to enhance students’ awareness of transferring the input materials to the output task. The refined sample unit displays closer links in-between three POA phases.

We may conclude from Stage 2 that a divide between learning and use may occur when input activities fail to enable students to complete output tasks within the limited classroom time. In the next stage, the *SEOP* writing team will primarily make refinements in the remaining 15 units drawing on the lessons gained in Stage 2, so as to fully realize the integration of learning and use in ESP textbook writing and classrooms.

### 3.3. Stage 3: Whole book

Drawing on lessons learned from Stage 2, the *SEOP* writing team continues to improve the textbook design. After this round of refinement, Teacher Z implements the whole textbook in the following 15 teaching weeks. The research team still observes classes from the smart classroom platform and collects the teacher’s feedback. Some new problems are exposed.

Firstly, some overlapping exercises lead to low efficiency in learning. To solve this problem, the *SEOP* writing team rearranges the order of the exercises and makes adaptations to show the progressive increase in difficulty and cognitive challenge for students. For example, in Unit 10 “Job offers” two similar questions are asked about students’ choice of offers in different enabling activities, Start-up and Input-oriented Activity 1 respectively. The Start-up question remains unchanged for it naturally transits to the topic of the next section, “What to consider before accepting a job offer.” The Input question is removed to the Output-oriented Activities section, which lowers the difficulty of the output project by dividing a big task into several mini-tasks. Another change made is adding more details to the new Output question, such as listing the major pros and cons of each job offer. Now students begin with their considerations about factors affecting their decisions on job offers, and later try to tackle a particular dilemma in the choice of job offers.

Secondly, some input materials that don’t scaffold students’ production either in content or in language are deleted. For example, the original text materials about telephone etiquette expressions in Unit 7 “Business reception” are replaced by expressions useful for the whole process of business reception, meanwhile redesigning one of the output tasks to match the new language input texts.

Lastly, though the *SEOP* units are sequenced in accordance with Krashen’s *i+1* hypothesis, after using the textbook in real classrooms, both the teacher and the students find the unit order to be incoherent and even confusing, such as jumping from making self-assessment before looking for a job to quitting your job for a career change. As a result, the writing team rearranges the unit order to

align with a college graduate’s career growth (Table 3).

Table 3 Topics of 16 units in *SEOP* refined

UNIT	TOPIC	UNIT	TOPIC	UNIT	TOPIC	UNIT	TOPIC
1	Self-assessment and career goals	5	Onboarding	9	Business trips	13	Compensation and benefits
2	Job fairs	6	Corporate culture	10	Business negotiations	14	Job promotion
3	Job interviews	7	Networking and connections	11	Customer relationships	15	Career changes
4	Job offers	8	Business reception	12	Business reports and presentations	16	Upskilling for future jobs

The refinement on *SEOP* done in Stage 3 shows the dynamics of coordinating the language theory, learners’ needs and teaching practices from a wholistic perspective.

#### 4. Conclusion

This study adopts the “Teaching Theory-Action Research” Integrated Model to examine the case of writing *SEOP*. Results show that the POA theory facilitates the integration of learning and use and improves occupational English proficiency, thus providing a referential model for compiling ESP textbooks catering to Chinese learners. The “motivating—enabling—assessing” process works effectively in building a textbook framework targeting at real-life communication, and the teaching practices prove an action research mode to be suitable for developing ESP teaching materials. Through the stages of First draft—Sample unit—Whole book, the writing team continuously refines and optimizes the design of activities based on the needs of teachers and learners.

Implementing the macro teaching theory in micro strategies of writing ESP textbooks has promoted the further applications of POA in ESP. In future, developing ESP teaching materials should continue the innovation in textbook structures, task design, assessing systems and so on, to align with the requirement for talents in the new era, and enhance their communication skills in the global context within the background of China’s strategic development.

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