

An Action Research on Enhancing Oral Report Proficiency in Advanced Business English Teaching Based on Poa

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Abstract: This paper conducts an action research on the teaching of Advanced Business English based on “Production-oriented approach”, probing into the effects of the teaching mode centered on output-driven and input-enabled instruction as well as evaluation-facilitated learning on the enhancement of students' oral report proficiency. The research went through two-round action interventions with observation, formulating plans, implementing plans and reflection, and the results show that besides higher participation rates, students' oral report proficiency has been significantly improved in terms of more substantial contents, more accurate language, clearer logic and more fluent expression.

1. Introduction

Advanced Business English is a basic specialized course for junior students majoring in Business English. Students are required to be able to communicate on basic business topics within realms of economics, management and laws in English, describing business contexts, expressing their views and proposing solutions to problems in specific business contexts in this course. However, after years of teaching, observing and reflection, together with results from questionnaires and interviews with students about how they evaluate their performances in this course, the author has found out that there are several deficiencies in students' real communicative proficiency. Therefore, it is imperative to take effective measures to make up for the deficiencies and help students improve their oral report proficiency through learning the course.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Production-Oriented Approach

“Production-oriented approach”, or POA for short, was proposed by Professor Wen Qiufang^[1] and is being developed continuously by like-minded English language researchers and teachers alike since its debut. Drawing on inspirations from Input Hypothesis by Krashen^[2] and Output Hypothesis by Swain^[3], Professor Wen put forward POA based on “Learning-centered, Learning-using integration, and Holistic Education” teaching philosophy.

POA's framework consists of three parts, namely, teaching philosophies, teaching hypotheses and teaching procedures. The first part serves as the overall guiding idea for teaching directions and goals, the second provides theoretical basis for numerous teaching and learning sessions, while the third part is responsible for arranging teaching sessions with effective methods to implement philosophies and tests hypotheses accordingly.^[1]

After a couple of revisions based on teaching and learning practices and reflection, the contents of the three parts mentioned above have been enriched to better serve POA's purposes. In the latest POA model^[4], Cultural Interaction Hypothesis and Key Competencies are incorporated into its original teaching philosophies, as the former helps learners handle the relationship between source language culture and local culture properly, and the latter emphasizes the importance of mastering

transferring ability, learning ability and cooperation ability for language learners. As for teaching hypotheses, besides traditional importance attached to input and output of language learning, POA intentionally puts output in the first place with the aim to create a sense of hunger to stimulate students' learning enthusiasm. Selective Learning Hypothesis, goal-oriented, encourages an efficient use of time and energy for better and in-depth learning. Assessment for Learning Hypothesis calls for evaluation that encourages and facilitates further learning, such as TSCA (Teacher-Student Collaborative Assessment). In the practical part of teaching procedures, the typical cycle of moving from output-driven to input-enabled instruction with evaluation-facilitated learning recycles several times within a unit module depending on requirements of fulfilling major tasks and minor tasks.

There are three evaluation indexes for motivating output-driven sessions, namely, communication authenticity, cognition challenge and appropriateness of output goals. The purpose of input-enabled instruction is to provide students with "scaffolding" in terms of contents, language and structure. There are also three evaluation indexes for effective input-enabled sessions, that is, preciseness, gradualness and diversity^[4]. In the assessment session, TSCA is applied to complement other ways of evaluation so as to provide opportunities for better reviewing, consolidating and reinforcing newly-learnt knowledge.

2.2 Action Research

In recent years, Action Research in the realm of education is gaining popularity and as many scholars are in favour of its use in solving real problems that occur in teaching and learning. Arhar et al. ^[5] believe that Action Research means reflective teaching. Professor Wen Qiufang^[6] holds that its core refers to actions with purposes, rationale, monitor and reflection.

Overall speaking, Action Research in teaching, by integrating theory with practice, provides targeted solutions to various problems in class, with cycles of planning, implementing plans, observing and reflecting.

2.3 Significance of the Current Study

Therefore, the current research intends to apply POA to enhance students' oral report proficiency in Advanced Business English teaching by taking effective actions and make targeted interventions over the course of a semester. Altogether, two rounds of Action Research were carried out: the initial round to check and prepare students for the course objectives, and the second round to apply POA to solve problems identified in the previous round and enhance students' oral report proficiency accordingly.

3. The First Round of Action Intervention ---

3.1 The Initial Action Intervention Measures

After initial observation and selective interviews with students, the author found the following problems in teaching and learning the course: the contents of some texts are challenging and some are boring with much business information and many business-related terms; a number of students were not used to speaking English in public, let alone express their viewpoints freely; some students pay too much attention to understanding meanings of specific words and terms without proper help and guidance in using the vocabulary and analyzing structures of texts; there is insufficient time for oral English practice in class for every student. In terms of problems mentioned above, the author formulated and implemented a series of measures. First of all, a course orientation class was carefully designed to guide students through the goals and requirements of the course, with emphasis on class performance formative evaluation, the important role output plays in language learning, and the significance of speech in modern society. Secondly, unit objectives were designed and text guiding questions were asked in advance to ease students' anxiety in understanding challenging materials and facilitate their self-study. Thirdly, output tasks were designed in a way that was supposed to arouse enthusiasm to participate and encourage team spirits and collaboration.

3.2 Effects of the Measures

The first round of action intervention which lasted for three weeks succeeded in easing some anxiety about challenging learning materials and motivate more students to take part in discussions and presentations. However, the quality of their oral speech output on average was still not up to the criteria. Besides, some students regarded class participation as a required task they had to fulfill but not out of their own accord.

3.3 Problems Identified and Reflections on Them

Subsequent questionnaires and interviews revealed the following findings. 71% of students showed their approval of receiving lists of unit objectives and text guiding questions, but 2 students out of 12 students who were interviewed did not like the idea very much as they held that they were deprived of exploring useful knowledge on their own. 32% of students found it was still difficult for them to talk about the business topics freely and confidently, and 4 students out of 12 students who were interviewed confessed that discussions and presentations related to the text were still beyond their grasp and sometimes they had to pretend to be actively involved in class performances in order to earn bonuses for passing the course. 3 students out of 12 complained about demotivating group work that consumed a lot of time and energy.

Upon reflection, the author summarized three main deficiencies in students' oral report proficiency: a lack of rich and effective contents with business information, a lack of a clear structure and in their speech, and a lack of business-related vocabulary repertoire. And these deficiencies may lead to students unwilling to take an active part in class discussion and presentation and make real progress in oral report proficiency. In order to motivate students to learn by doing both effectively and efficiently based on POA, steps must be taken to select suitable learning materials, provide targeted scaffolding help, and formulate tailoring evaluation criteria with guiding rubrics for further improvement.

4. The Second Round of Action Intervention

4.1 Design of Action Research Plans

In the second round of action intervention process, the author redesigned the course objectives for teaching and learning with the focus on oral report output, in light of POA's idea of providing contents, language and structure help to students. The first is business communicative objective which means being provided with contents-based knowledge input in realms of economics, management and laws, students will be able to understand and master business knowledge so that they can describe phenomena and express their views in a general business world accurately and clearly. The second is business language objective meaning being provided with input of business-related vocabulary and sentence patterns in English, students will be enabled to use the working language accurately, fluently and properly. The third is oral report strategy objective meaning being guided through principles, tactics and methods of making business speeches, participating in debates and leaderless discussion groups, students will be capable of delivering oral reports with coherence, clarity, focus and logic.

Based on the three input-output objectives, unit tasks were refined and divided, input materials were optimized, and TSCA was carried out to ensure input and output with a high quality.

4.2 Implementing the Action Plan

The author takes Unit Five Creativity and Innovation in Advanced Business English Integrated course for example to illustrate how steps were taken. In this unit, Design Thinking is the main business topic for input and output activities, and output tasks were issued in a way that was interesting, challenging, and attainable.

4.2.1 Preparing Students for in-Depth Learning with Targeted Background Knowledge

Taking the example from the textbook for the object of case study about a company's slack

bicycle sales, the author encouraged students to b in groups and put forward solutions to the problem of flat growth. Students' ideas were shared and discussed, but no standard solution was given by the teacher. Then, students watched a speech entitled *What is Design Thinking* by Tim Brown and were guided to find out the definition, features and three essentials of Design Thinking from the speech. Meanwhile, key words such as “human-centered, desirability, viability, feasibility” were selected from the text book to m what they heard and saw from the video.

In this stage, as students are challenged to offer solutions to a company at the beginning of the unit and the case puts them in a real business scenario, they are more likely to take an active role in group discussion. They are eager to try, and meanwhile not sure whether they can get the right solutions. Therefore, when the teacher tells them they can find the way out for the company from a speech delivered by Tim Brown, the very person whose IDEO team helped the company's bicycle sales flourish again, they would be more interested in and attentive to the topic of Design Thinking in the speech video, and are more ready to embrace essentials of Design Thinking.

4.2.2 Guiding Students through the Unit with Discovered Learning Strategies

After finding the link between the speech video and the text, it was time to explore the theme, main idea, and structure of the article, as well as the main idea of each part in groups with a number of guiding questions. Students were encouraged to share their understanding first and feedbacks were given by both the teacher and other students. After more business-related background information were supplemented, students were guided to go back to the text and read in more details to draw mind maps to illustrate the three phases of application of Design Thinking: Inspiration, Ideation and Implementation, under the guidance of consumers' desirability, business viability and technological feasibility. The first stage of the mind map was illustrated by the teacher to offer the exemplar, and students analyzed the next two phases and drew mind maps in groups. Peer evaluation could be adopted at this moment although it would be all right if no rubrics were given. Finally, tips were summarized for employing Design Thinking.

In this stage, students' curiosity and learning initiative should be maintained by means of useful scaffolding help from both the teacher and peers. After analyzing the three “I” phases, students should find it quite enlightening to discover the actual measures taken in the case study and how Design Thinking is different from traditional design. They may also mentally compare and contrast what similarities and differences there are between their solutions before learning the case in details and solutions based on Design Thinking in the text. It is advisable that the teacher remind them of their previous solutions, not to embarrass them, but to highlight the essentials of Design Thinking, and praise students for their creativity if their solutions are brilliant to some extent or bear some similarities with Design Thinking.

4.2.3 Expanding Students' Knowledge and Skills with Selective Learning Materials and Tasks

A new case was chosen from an on-line training course on Design Thinking, and once again students were asked to provide their solutions first. The task was to design a gadget for the elderly in groups under the guidance of consumers' desirability, business viability and technological feasibility learned from the text and the speech video. Then representatives described how they would design a treading mill for the elderly, what the equipment would look like, and difficulties they still had with the designing. Afterwards, the teacher pointed out the fact that consumers' desirability, business viability and technological feasibility are three general principles and may not offer a hands-on approach to applying Design Thinking, and thus we could use more practical measures. Then the teacher elicited some key steps of implementing Design Thinking by asking students questions like “What are the needs of the elderly”, “How could you figure out their needs”, “How are you going to visualize the design” and so on. Then the teacher and students collaborated to piece together a five-step approach to apply Design Thinking. Having clarified the five steps of “Empathizing, Defining, Ideating, Prototyping, and Testing”, the teacher played a video to exemplify how we could design a gadget that the elderly truly want and need.

In this stage, students should be encouraged to figure out and “try out” handy approaches to apply Design Thinking. “Trying out” means that after imagining or visualizing how the steps are

being followed, they will have an awareness to carry out the five steps next time they are tasked with a design project. Therefore, this stage prepares students for the final production project of this unit.

4.2.4 Collaboration and Presentation in Class with Tsca to Facilitate Further Improvement

The first version of final production project of this unit was released one week before the final in-class presentation, only informing students they would design various bags using five-step approach to Design Thinking, and they would draw the finished products on paper with illustrations for functions, materials, accessories and so on. In addition, the teacher uploaded a video of a successful product presentation plus a vocabulary list of bags and accessories. Right in class, the second version of final production project of this unit was given, specifying that they would design a bag for one selected member from their study group. To be more specific, they would design and draw a graph of a bag in class without communication with the selected group member, “the customer”, who would also draw out the desired bag for themselves in one corner of the classroom; fifteen minutes later, they would swap the drawings and check whether “the designers” succeeded in meeting needs and wants of “the customer”; they would redesign the bag in collaboration; finally, two students from each group would make a mini product presentation together illustrating analysis of target consumers, features and functions of the designed bag and how the two were linked to cater to consumers' desirability. A rubric would be discussed and set up to assess the performances in collaboration with both the teacher and students. For this unit, the rubric covers the following aspects: Contents (covering vivid description of bag's features and functions, and clear explanation of how to cater to desirability of targeted consumers); Language (using accurate nouns and adjectives to describe features and function of bags fluently); Manners (making the presentation naturally and confidently with proper eye contacts and gestures); Visual aids (employing proper visual aids that draw attention and facilitate comprehension).

In this stage, the teacher intentionally stops “designers” from communicating with “consumers” so as to call students attention to the importance and challenges of the first step “Emphasizing” by bringing out the surprising knowledge gaps between them. And the interesting fact is that a large number of students had limited or even mis-informed knowledge of their group members' interests and preferences, even though they are desk-mates and . What is more, students are not asked directly to make product presentations; instead, they should be guided to find the proper way for making such presentations by doing first. Also, TSCA is applied to facilitate further improvement for making product presentations.

5. The Results of Action Research and Reflections

5.1 Observation of Class Performances

After twelve-week teaching and learning guided by POA, we were delighted to find that more students were genuinely willing to participate in class discussion and presentations, and they were more confident when expressing their ideas about business-related topics in class. What is most important is that they were able to put forward their views backed by evidence, such as statistics, examples and quotations more logically and fluently in English.

5.2 Results of the Questionnaire Survey

The questionnaire survey showed that 82% of students believed that the new approach helped them get familiar with business-related knowledge, 84% of them thought it facilitated language learning and using in a business context, and 73% of them found it easier for them to master oral report making strategies.

5.3 Reflection Journals of Students

Reflection journals of students can shed some light on the effects of POA on improving their oral report proficiency through learning the course. Excerpts from three journals were selected as proof of effectiveness of POA-enabled instruction.

Student A: Case study and simulated business communication not only arouse our interests, but also help us explore business contexts and knowledge more easily.

Student B: Learning business-related vocabulary by doing enlarges and consolidates my language repertoire.

Student C: Oral report making strategies enable me to have a clear and logical structure of what I am going to say, which greatly relieves the anxiety of speaking in class.

5.4 Analysis of the Results

Based on observation of class performances, results of the questionnaire survey, and reflection journals of students, we could conclude that generally speaking, students respond positively to POA-enabled instruction, believing it stimulates their enthusiasm, as well as provides guidance and help to enhance their oral report proficiency. Admittedly, there were still some problems with the second round of action intervention. First of all, some tasks were challenging and required a lot of time and energy from students, which exerted pressure on them. What is more, due to time limit in class, not every student could receive targeted feedback, and more rounds of production practice were not carried out to help students make further progress.

5.5 Solutions

It is recommended that the teacher should design and refine production tasks in a gradual way and provide scaffolding help to ease anxiety of learning new and difficult knowledge based on study of difficult and important points of production tasks. It is also necessary to carry out more than one round of TSCA based on thorough understanding of rubrics. In addition, more guidance should be provided to help students enhance their evaluation literacy of high-level tasks, such as accuracy and relevance of business communication skills.

6. Conclusion

Under the guidance of POA, the current paper explores how students enhanced their oral report proficiency with the help of a two-round action intervention. After a fifteen-week research, it is found that first of all the approach succeeded in stimulating students' interest in learning the Course of Advanced Business English and participating in oral report activities; secondly the quality of their reports were improved in terms of more substantial contents, more accurate language, clearer logic and more fluent expression. However, as action research is characterized with spiral development, and teaching is a dynamic process, it is advised that multiple research methods should be applied, such as quantitative research method, to make research results more reliable and convincing.

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