

Reform and Practice in College English Teaching of Letter Writing

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Abstract

Based on the Production-Oriented Approach (POA), this study designs a writing teaching mode of “motivation-facilitation-evaluation-revision” and applies it to college English letter writing teaching. The teaching practice lasts 15 weeks with the teaching subjects being the first-year non-English major students from the 2024 cohort of an application-oriented university. The results show that the writing teaching mode based on the POA has significantly improved the effect of letter writing teaching, enhanced students’ writing motivation, obviously improved the quality of students’ writing output, and enabled teachers to balance personalized teaching.

Key words: College English; Letter writing; Teaching mode; POA

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1. INTRODUCTION

English writing serves the functions of expressing thoughts and conveying information. It is an important indicator for measuring students’ language output

and a key aspect reflecting their English proficiency. Among various forms of English writing, English letter writing holds irreplaceable significance in cross-cultural communication, academic and career development, personal literacy improvement, and coping with specific scenarios.

However, in current college English letter writing teaching, classes are mostly teacher-centered, with excessive emphasis on letter formats in teaching content. As a result, students lack enthusiasm and motivation for such writing tasks. They struggle to select appropriate language styles (e.g., formal/informal), cohesive devices, and expression strategies based on communication scenarios. Additionally, their written outputs are deficient in logic and coherence, with numerous vocabulary and grammar errors. Meanwhile, students exhibit weak cultural awareness, including insufficient understanding of letter formats in English-speaking countries, politeness principles, and taboos in cross-cultural communication.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Overview of POA Theory

The Production-Oriented Approach (POA) is an innovative teaching method constructed by Professor Wen Qiufang and her team at Beijing Foreign Studies University to cater to the characteristics of intermediate and advanced foreign language learners in China. This theoretical framework originated from the “Output-Driven Hypothesis” and was revised to the “Output-Driven, Input-Enabled Hypothesis” in early 2014. It was officially named POA at the 7th International Conference on English Language Teaching in China in October of the same year (Wen, 2015). Qiu (2020) provided a comprehensive review of the birth background, theoretical framework, and application of POA theory, and analyzed the problems existing in its application process.

The revised theoretical framework of the “Production-Oriented Approach” in 2018 consists of three parts: teaching philosophy, teaching hypotheses, and teaching procedures. The teaching philosophy encompasses “learner-centeredness,” “integration of learning and use,” “cultural exchange,” and “key competencies”; the teaching hypotheses include “output-driven,” “input-enabled,” “selective learning,” and “learning through assessment”; and the teaching procedures comprise “motivating,” “enabling,” and “assessing.”

As one of the teaching philosophies of POA, “learning-use integration” aims to address the issue of “separation of learning and use.” Here, “learning” refers to input-based learning, while “use” refers to the production of language output. “Learning-use integration” advocates for effectively linking input-based learning content with output-oriented production activities, promoting the practice of learning a little and using a little, thereby overcoming the previous disconnection between “learning” and “use.” (Wen, 2015; Wen, 2018).

The application research of POA covers a wide range of courses, including general English, business English, information technology English, and academic English; it involves various language skill courses such as English writing, reading, listening, and speaking.

In addition to English classes, some non-English language courses, such as German, Romanian, Korean, Malay, and Sinhala, have also attempted to introduce POA into teaching (Qiu, 2020). Furthermore, the application level of POA theory is also relatively broad, encompassing junior high school, high school, undergraduate, and graduate levels (Guo, 2019; Xu, 2023; Zhang et al., 2019). Due to the significant differences between the teaching philosophy, process, and steps of POA and traditional teaching methods, there are indeed some challenges in applying POA theory to teaching practice. Therefore, when practicing POA theory in teaching, teachers need to flexibly and precisely design and implement teaching based on the actual situation of students, teaching objectives, and course goals.

2.2 The Application of POA in College English Writing Instruction

In recent years, empirical research on the application of POA in college English writing instruction has gradually increased. These studies primarily focus on designing various effective driving, enabling, and assessing activities based on the POA teaching process of “driving-enabling-assessing” to improve the effectiveness of English writing instruction.

Chen and Wen (2020) conducted a semester-long POA teaching intervention with 90 non-English major students to enhance nominalization output in academic English writing. After a semester of instruction, an analysis of students’ learning logs, interviews, production texts, and classroom observations and interviews with peer teachers verified

the significant effectiveness of the POA teaching mode in improving nominalization output in academic writing.

Niu (2020) believes that in the driving phase of college English writing instruction, teachers need to pre-select teaching materials that align with students’ interests and psychological needs and the key to the enabling process lies in the high degree of cooperation between teachers and students, and positive teacher-student interaction is the guarantee for completing the entire English writing instruction process.

Liu (2023) studied the evaluation mode of college English writing instruction that combines teacher-student collaborative evaluation and machine evaluation under the guidance of the POA concept based on the machine writing evaluation system “iWrite”. Results show that college English writing instruction guided by the Production-Oriented Approach can change students’ writing attitudes, enhance their writing interest and confidence, and improve their writing abilities.

Cao (2017) conducted a two-semester teaching experiment with first-year undergraduate students from Harbin Normal University as the main research subjects and found that the POA theoretical teaching mode can alleviate students’ writing anxiety to some extent, stimulate their writing enthusiasm, and improve writing quality. Liu (2019) explored the effectiveness of introducing the POA concept into instruction, believing that the Production-Oriented Approach has good feasibility in college English writing instruction and can improve students’ English writing proficiency to a certain extent.

Zhang (2023) conducted college English CET-4 writing instruction under the POA mode. The research results indicate that the POA mode is suitable for college English CET-4 writing instruction and can effectively stimulate students’ subjective initiative.

The above studies have all verified the feasibility and effectiveness of POA in college English writing instruction. This study plans to introduce the teaching philosophy of POA into college English writing instruction at a comprehensive university in Beijing, and design a blended teaching mode for college English writing that is suitable for students with low English proficiency level with reference to the POA teaching process.

2.3 Research Related to English Letter Writing Teaching

Research on teaching modes of English letter writing is relatively limited, with most studies focusing on high school students. As for research targeting college English letter writing, the focus is mainly on the competencies assessed in letter writing tasks of the College English Test Band 4 (CET-4).

Fu (2021) applies “peer + teacher” written corrective feedback to give feedback to junior high school students’ letter writing, exploring the influence of “peer + teacher”

written corrective feedback on the content theme, discourse structure, language use and text design of English letter. The results show that “peer + teacher” written corrective feedback had a positive impact on the improvement of junior high school students’ overall letter writing performance.

Xue et al. (2017) holds that college English Test Band 4 (CET-4) letter writing serves as an effective means to assess students’ composition-writing abilities in the CET-4 exam. It can flexibly and rigorously evaluate students’ writing skills in terms of structural organization, content expression, semantic completeness, and the characteristics of their thinking as reflected in their compositions. Through an analysis of the features and examples of epistolary writing, this study proposes that CET-4 epistolary writing should not only ensure the accuracy, coherence, and completeness of semantic expression but also demonstrate correctness, novelty, and diversity in sentence structure and language expression.

3. RESEARCH METHODS

3.1 Problems Addressed

3.1.1 Weak motivation in students’ English letter writing and disconnection between learning and application.

In traditional English letter writing teaching, excessive emphasis is placed on teaching and practicing letter formats, resulting in a lack of effective connection between input-based learning content and output-oriented production activities.

3.1.2 Low efficiency of students’ writing output and poor quality of written texts. Students in application-oriented universities generally have weak English writing abilities. Common issues in their writing include incomplete text structure, lack of coherence, and numerous vocabulary and grammar errors. There is significant room for improvement in both writing efficiency and the quality of written outputs.

3.2 Design of the Letter Writing Teaching Mode

Based on the POA’s teaching philosophy of “learning-centeredness and integration of learning and application” and its teaching processes of motivation, facilitation, and evaluation, this study designed an 8-step English letter writing teaching process: “pre-class online motivation— in-class offline facilitation and evaluation— post-class online refinement and reflection”.

The first 3 steps (“view—discuss—translate”) constitute the pre-class online motivation stage: View: Students watch theme-based situational videos online to stimulate interest in the writing topic and connect it to real-life scenarios. Discuss: Students engage in online theme discussions to deepen their understanding of the writing task, accumulate materials for subsequent writing, and discuss cultural differences. Translate: Students

participate in an online translation-for-writing activity, translating Chinese letters into English. This helps them grasp the framework while recognizing gaps in their language and writing skills.

The middle 4 steps (“teach—write—evaluate—test”) form the in-class offline facilitation and evaluation stage: Teach: Teachers provide concise explanations of key writing points, offering scaffolding for writing skills and strategies. Write: Students attempt initial output based on the writing task. Evaluate: Teachers and students evaluate the first drafts of the written texts. In this step, students gain a deeper understanding of their gaps in text organization, content structuring, and language expression. Test: Specialized training on high-frequency grammar and vocabulary for writing is conducted through online tests, serving as language scaffolding to further promote high-quality writing output.

The final step is the revision and reflection stage. After class, students use AI to conduct a comprehensive check of their compositions. They refine their first drafts by integrating suggestions from teachers, peers, and AI feedback. Additionally, they reflect on real-world issues addressed or reflected in their writing and attempt to propose solutions. With this, the 8-step writing teaching process completes a full closed loop.

4. TEACHING PRACTICE

4.1 Teaching Subjects

The teaching subjects were 309 first-year non-English major students from the 2024 cohort of an application-oriented university, covering 8 administrative classes and 5 majors. Their average score in the college entrance English exam was 90.7 (with a 60.5% score rate), and their average pre-test score in writing at the beginning of the semester was 65.3 (on a 100-point scale). The score rates in the three dimensions of structure, content, and language were 66%, 66%, and 64% respectively.

Overall, this group of students had a relatively weak English foundation, with significant room for improvement in writing structure, logic and coherence, appropriateness and richness of content, and accuracy of language application.

4.2 Writing Teaching Content and Class Hour Arrangement

In the first semester of the 2024-2025 academic year, this study implemented POA-based college English letter writing teaching for the target students. The teaching content included 5 units: thank-you letters, invitation letters, congratulation letters, job application letters, and apology letters. Each unit was allocated 5 class hours, including 1 hour for pre-class online motivation, 3 hours for in-class offline facilitation and evaluation, and 1 hour for post-class online revision and reflection.

4.3 Implementation of the Writing Teaching Process (Taking Thank-You Letter Teaching as an Example)

4.3.1 Pre-class online motivation stage

Step 1: Situational engagement

Teachers uploaded a 1-minute micro-video titled "Saying Thanks" on the university's online teaching platform (Tsinghua Education Online). The video compiled clips of thank-you scenes from movies, including thanking doctors (*Meet the Parents*), friends (*Good Luck Chuck*), supervisors (*The Pursuit of Happiness*), and lovers (*Rio 2*). Through watching the video, students were immersed in various real-life thank-you scenarios and connected with emotional expression situations in daily life.

Step 2: Theme discussion

Teachers posted a discussion topic on the platform: "Do you often say thanks to others? Or, are you often thanked by others? For what occasions?" Through online discussions, students realized the limitations of their daily expressions of gratitude and reflected on the importance of emotional expression in real life and interpersonal communication.

Step 3: Translation-for-Writing challenge

Teachers assigned a translation task where students translated a Chinese thank-you letter into English. In the Chinese text, the framework (salutation, reasons for thanks, and signature) was highlighted in green to help students grasp the letter structure; difficult words or common expressions were highlighted in yellow, such as "generous help", "benefit a lot", "cherish the goodwill you showed", and "repay your kindness". This allowed students to identify gaps in their language expression during translation and accumulate linguistic resources for subsequent English thank-you letter writing while attempting to address these gaps.

4.3.2 In-class offline facilitation -evaluation stage

Step 1: Motivation stimulation and goal explanation

Teachers clarified the communicative purposes of thank-you letter writing, including expressing gratitude, building relationships, and affirming contributions. They also distinguished between occasions and language use for formal and informal thanks, as well as cultural adaptation (e.g., use of salutations, closing polite phrases).

Step 2: Content facilitation

Teachers organized students to discuss a person they wanted to thank in life and share the reasons for gratitude. During the discussion, students actively brainstormed, mentioning family members, friends, teachers, classmates, national leaders, and even themselves, thus initially collecting content materials for the thank-you letter.

Teachers then explained key points of thank-you letter writing, including its components (Salutation, Expression of gratitude, Specific details, Closing thoughts, Signature),

writing tips (Be specific, Be sincere, Be timely), and a comparison between formal and informal thank-you letters.

Step 3: Framework and language facilitation

Activity 1: Target language focus

Teachers provided 10 functional sentences for purposes such as showing intention, stating specific reasons for thanks, and expressing gratitude again. Students were organized to classify these sentences by function and extract common vocabulary and sentence patterns for thank-you letters.

Activity 2: Target grammar focus

The grammar focus of this unit was the accurate use of tenses. Teachers provided 10 sentences containing present, past, future, and past future tenses, and organized students to discuss the usage of each tense. Students then completed an online in-class grammar quiz, which served as language scaffolding to further promote high-quality writing output.

Step 4: Output attempt

Teachers assigned an open-ended thank-you letter writing task, asking students to select a real-life thank-you recipient and reason independently. Students wrote their first drafts within a 20-minute limit, and teachers collected the drafts in real-time using a "class companion" tool.

Step 5: Teacher-student co-evaluation

Activity 1: Teacher's demonstrative evaluation

Teachers presented a standard sample invitation letter titled "Inviting a friend to attend a wedding ceremony" and explained the evaluation criteria, including content (30%, closely aligned with communicative purposes, clear logic, complete information), language (20%, correct grammar, appropriate vocabulary, natural cohesion), framework (20%, complete and clear structure), format and writing (15%, compliance with letter norms, neat handwriting), and culture (15%, adaptation to target culture, e.g., formal/informal style).

Activity 2: Peer evaluation in groups

Students formed writing circles for peer evaluation, with each group member responsible for evaluating one dimension, including structure, language, content, format, and writing. The evaluation was limited to 15 minutes.

Activity 3: Teacher-student co-evaluation

Groups that completed peer evaluation reported their findings to the teacher. Teachers summarized typical problems across groups, provided targeted guidance for individual writing issues, selected representative sentences for revision practice, and offered multiple revised versions to inspire students' thinking on flexibility and accuracy in language use.

4.3.3 Post-class online revision and reflection stage

After class, students used AI tools (Doubao, Wenxiaoyan, Kimi, etc.) for comprehensive text evaluation, including checking clarity of expression, coherence, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary. AI provided detailed lists of

specific issues in the text with revision suggestions, covering overall evaluations of structure, content, and language, as well as detailed feedback on format, expression of date/time/place, capitalization of proper nouns, use of articles, pronoun reference, conjunctions, differences between present and past forms of modal verbs, distinctions between formal and informal language, and tense/voice usage. Students integrated suggestions from peers, teachers, and AI to revise their first drafts into second drafts and reflected on recurring problems in their writing.

5. RESULT ANALYSIS

5.1 Enhanced Student Writing Motivation and Increased Engagement

At the beginning of implementing the POA-based writing teaching mode, a survey on English writing learning was conducted among the 309 students in the 2024 cohort. Results showed that students spent very limited time on English writing practice after class: less than 5% of students regularly engaged in independent English writing training; approximately 63% spent about half an hour per week on writing practice; and only 31% spent about 1 hour per week. Additionally, 43% of students reported moderate participation in classroom teaching activities.

After one semester of applying the POA-based mode, students' independent after-class writing practice increased significantly: the average frequency of autonomous participation in writing theme discussions was 3 times per student per week; approximately 80% of students completed online translation-for-writing training and watched writing theme micro-videos weekly; and 65% of students spent about 1 hour on online learning per week. In classroom teaching, approximately 90% of students actively participated in writing activities and completed related tasks carefully and promptly.

5.2 Significant Improvement in the Quality of Students' Written Output

Before applying the POA-based mode, approximately 79% of students hoped to complete 1 English writing assignment per week. After implementation, around 85% of students could produce 2 pieces per week. Most students' first drafts were around 100 words, while the word count of revised second drafts increased by 15%-45%.

Furthermore, the average pre-test score of the students was 59.6 (on a 100-point scale) with a pass rate of 68.8%, and approximately 70% of students had issues such as incomplete structure, lack of text coherence, insufficient content, grammar errors, unclear expression, or limited vocabulary. After one semester of the new teaching mode, their average final writing score was 71.7 (on a

100-point scale) with a pass rate of 93.3%, and about 60% of students produced texts with correct format, complete structure, and relatively rich sentences and vocabulary.

6. CONCLUSION

Starting from the existing problems in English letter writing teaching and learning, this study innovated and practiced the college English letter writing teaching mode based on the Production-Oriented Approach, achieving certain results in stimulating students' writing motivation, improving their writing skills, and promoting the integration of learning and application. However, areas such as situational creation in the motivation stage, attention to individual differences in the facilitation stage, and the richness of teaching resources still need further improvement. In the future, the research team will continue to deepen the study of teaching modes of college English writing to better adapt to the development trend of educational informatization and the needs of talent cultivation.

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