

## On Teaching of English Majors' Thesis Writing Based On Production-Oriented Approach

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**Abstract:** With the deepening of higher education reform, how to considerably improve the quality of English major students in universities from the perspective of thesis writing has become indispensable for educators. Comparing the teaching method of traditional writing course, this article explores the feasibility of the Production-oriented Approach (POA) in teaching thesis writing of English majors. In addition, from the three elements of POA – motivating, enabling and assessing, this paper put forwards viable teaching suggestions based on POA for thesis writing of English majors. Significantly, this article aims to cultivate students' consciousness of innovation and proficiency of scientific practice, thus enhancing the academic literacy of English majors.

**Keywords:** Production-oriented Approach (POA), English majors, thesis writing, teaching.

### INTRODUCTION

In accordance with requirements of the syllabus for English majors of colleges and universities (2000) in China, dissertation or graduation thesis is one of the indispensable conditions for obtaining a bachelor's degree in education of undergraduates. It is also one of the methods to measure and evaluate students' comprehensive ability and quality. In light of this, thesis writing course for English majors has been set up in diverse foreign language colleges and faculty of foreign languages in comprehensive universities. Consequently, thesis writing course has gradually become the research object of foreign language teaching and researchers. And how to improve the quality of English majors' thesis writing by means of writing course is an issue that many college educators have always been concerned about.

However, at present, the current situation for writing undergraduate thesis of English majors in China is still not optimistic. Above all, with the increasingly fierce social competition and employment pressure, most English majors pay more attention to the completion of credits and pass the TEM-4 and TEM-8, subjectively ignoring graduation thesis. Secondly, graduation thesis not only requires students to be familiar with relevant academic norms and conducts rigorous research attempts, but also requires students to analyze some problems independently (Dai Weidong,

2007), whereas most students still have weak awareness of independence in their own academic research. Thirdly, course teaching in thesis writing is put in an inferior position. As to colleges and universities abroad, there is a systematic, continuous and complete teaching link for teaching academic writing (Neil, 2014). In contrast, the academic writing in China is not perfected in the curriculum setting and the systematic embodiment. Seldom can students obtain adequate guidance in practice and training. There is no doubt that traditional teaching mode of thesis writing is stereotyped, the teaching content is difficult to understand, and the teaching strategies and instructional methods need to be further strengthened.

In order to change this situation, this paper advocates that the teaching of English majors' thesis writing should resort to the Production-oriented Approach (POA), motivating students' enthusiasm and participation. This article aims to cultivate students' consciousness of innovation and proficiency of scientific practice, thus enhancing the academic literacy of English majors and improving the quality of undergraduate thesis.

### Status Quo of Thesis Writing Course for English Majors

The principal purpose of the thesis writing course for English majors is to boost the basic

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theoretical knowledge in writing of students, to cultivate students' ability to write graduation thesis in English, to familiarize them with the writing norms of thesis writing, and to make them equipped with academic learning ability and innovative thinking ability. At present, many problems in teaching thesis writing of English majors have not been well resolved.

The first one should be stressed is that thesis writing course for English major neglect the cultivation of the independent consciousness of academic research for students. It is undeniable that in some colleges and universities, there is still a phenomenon of teachers' "classroom filling", which makes students accustomed to passively acquiring knowledge and completing assignments. In the long run, students are prone to lose the ability to analyze and solve problems on their own, and their awareness of independent academic research is relatively weak, which is particularly evident in the writing process of academic papers (Wei Qi, 2017). According to his own teaching practice, Gong Lixia concluded that English majors have a wealth of problems in their essays such as "unskilled topics, vague research ideas, poor language skills, etc.". Sun Wenkang (2004) conducted a survey of English academic paper writing ability in 147 colleges and universities in China, of which the finding is that English major undergraduates have shortcomings in literature search and reserve of academic language knowledge. All these researches support that students of English major master little and insufficiency knowledge in the thesis writing class. Some students are short of positive attitudes and motivations for thesis writing, which means that they still do not possess the logical thinking ability and basic scientific literacy that required in the undergraduate stage.

In addition, there is no denying that course of thesis writing for English majors is lack of a regular inspection to test the practical ability of students' thesis writing. Teaching thesis writing for English majors, as a matter of fact, not only instills language and culture knowledge, but also should pay attention to the practice of language skills (Wang Shouren, 2008). Nevertheless, in the current teaching process of thesis writing, despite plentiful corresponding research methods and theories in thesis writing, teachers still have overlooked the consistent practice towards thesis writing, lacking sufficient writing training and activity design, which is not beneficial for students to effectively implement the learning process. Neither can it be conducive to students' proficiency in relevant academic writing skills, nor combining research theory with practical thesis writing. For example, although some students have mastered the methods of English literature research, they are still in deficiency of practical experience in effectively retrieving and collecting relevant literature, which leads to the low writing quality of the literature review in the paper.

What's more, most of the current thesis writing course mainly relies on the traditional teaching mode that emphasizes simple inheritance of thesis writing knowledge. The traditional teaching method is not multifold and comprehensive (Zhan Ting, 2015). Apart from directly displaying writing norms, requirements, methods, techniques, matters that need attention in writing, etc., the traditional mode cannot cover other aspects such as actual process, problem solving, and other effective practice, and cannot integrate a variety of resources and means to enrich the teaching of the course. Furthermore, classroom teaching is rather rigid and inflexible. Teachers mainly focus on prescribed standards such as thesis writing norms and requirements, generally listing the items and explaining them detail by detail. Both teaching content and form are dry, dull, and inflexible, which cannot stimulate the enthusiasm and creativity of students.

Therefore, the overall teaching mode of English majors' writing is relatively obsolete, and it is impossible to achieve the teaching goal of high-level university, that is, to cultivate high-quality compound talents with scientific consciousness and innovative spirit. Even worse, it puts the learning of thesis writing merely on the surface and loses its fundamental meaning and value. Accordingly, the traditional teacher-centered classroom teaching cannot work out the long-standing problem, and the teaching method of thesis writing course urgently needs to be reformed.

### **Production-oriented Approach**

The Production-oriented Approach (POA) is an exploration and attempt of foreign language teaching theory with Chinese characteristics built by foreign language educators represented by the scholar Wen Qiufang. On ground of the "output hypothesis" of Swain (1995), this theory mainly targets adult foreign language learners in China.

The theoretical system of POA consists of three parts: teaching philosophy, teaching hypothesis and teaching process. The teaching philosophy includes "learning center theory", "integration of learning and doing" and "holistic education" (Wen Qiufang, 2015). Teaching hypotheses include "output-driven hypothesis", "input-enabled hypothesis" and "selective learning hypothesis". The teaching process covers three core phases, motivating, enabling and assessing, all of which are teacher-mediated. The theoretical system breaks the long-term "teacher-centered" or "student-centered" classroom teaching pattern, and returns to the essence of classroom teaching, that is, teaching must achieve instructional objectives and promote effective learning. This new pattern advocates the close-knit combination of input learning and productive practice, contributing to organic linkage and no obvious time interval between the two parts.

As a challenge to the separation of learning and application, POA treats output as the starting point of teaching, stimulates students' motivation and enthusiasm for learning. Meanwhile, aiming at output, it integrates learning with application, and promotes learning by application, thus highlighting the practicality of language. POA has also transformed the traditional English teaching with a "text-centered" teaching model, emphasizing student-centered classroom, the students' output process, and the output results, and building an open and diversified English classroom.

With the continuous advancement of college English teaching reform, the Production-oriented Approach has gradually received attention. Some scholars study the effectiveness and feasibility of POA from practical teaching. For low efficiency and backward teaching methods in college English teaching, Ouyang Juan (2016) profoundly discusses the feasibility of applying POA to college English teaching and what challenges it will face. She proposes that POA teaching method centers on the occurrence of effective learning, and there is almost no time interval between learning input and output. Inevitably, the closely integrated teaching concepts of POA are suitable for the development needs of college English teaching. Zhang Lingli (2017) further explores the effectiveness of POA, indicating that POA is an effective teaching model to promote students' all-round development. Li Yan (2017) probes into the feasibility of POA in the reform of college English teaching, and proposes that POA shows its compatibility for different levels of students. Its salient operability and practicality can enable POA to ameliorate the current situation of college English teaching, help improve the quality of English teaching, and foster high-quality English talents for the society.

A number of teaching experiments so far have been carried out to provide classroom practical experience for the construction of this theoretical system. One portion of the researches underlines the three teaching phases of "motivating, enabling and assessing" (Cao Qiaozhen, 2017; Qiu Lin, 2017; Sun Shuguang, 2017), while some based on teaching individual units (Zhang Wenjuan 2015, 2016, 2017), or compiling textbooks (Chang Xiaoling, 2017). All of these studies prove that POA has yielded good results in the process of empirical teaching research, completed the expected goals to varying degrees, and improved the initiative of students' independent learning, which is highly feasible.

### **Feasibility of Applying POA into Teaching Thesis Writing of English Majors**

English thesis writing course has been set up for English majors in many colleges and universities, therefore students can learn thesis writing in a specific course separate from a general writing course. However, under the traditional teaching mode, the

teaching methods adopted by teachers are too rigid and monotonous; as a consequence, teaching thesis writing can only guarantee the basic realization of the two goals of "knowledge and skills" and "process and method" of most students, while it cannot assure them of the most effective language output. On ground of the theory of output and input, POA features in its own merits including explicit teaching objectives and scientific teaching process, which is unmatched by the traditional class teaching mode. Hence, the following is an analysis of the feasibility of POA in thesis writing course for English majors.

### **English majors possess the capacity to accomplish output tasks**

Professor Wen Qiufang (2012) pointed out that the POA-oriented participant is a foreign language learner with intermediate or higher level, on account of the consideration of cognition level. She upheld that the intermediate and advanced foreign language learners' own linguistic knowledge is sufficient to produce language output, contribute to productive activities, and complete output tasks with ease. A large proportion of thesis writing course found in college English majors are exclusively for junior and senior students, whose English level is basically intermediate or high in this stage. Not only do they learn by rote the fundamental vocabulary, the main grammar rules and common sentence patterns, but also get hold of English writing approaches such as word selection, organization of paragraphs, development or layout of texts, and document format. Provided that teachers can apply POA in course in which students can learn more language knowledge at the same time, the students can consolidate the existing and new language knowledge in practice driven by the output activities and tasks.

### **POA stimulates students' enthusiasm and initiative for learning and writing thesis**

Since the thesis writing course of English majors mainly offer the pertinent knowledge of writing such as writing norms, requirements, methods, techniques, and matters that need attention in writing, it is inevitable that teaching contents are so plodding that they cannot stimulate students' interest in learning and students with a passive state of mind cannot realize the importance of thesis writing. As Professor Wen Qiufang (2017) said, the curriculum and teaching practice of English majors have been instructed by ideology of valuing input over output for many years, resulting in inadequate learning expectation and curiosity. The teaching philosophy of POA "Learning-centered Principle", "Learning-using Integrated Principle" and "Whole-person Education Principle" are very suitable for the adjustment of current thesis writing curriculum. Driven by output, POA can promote the generation of individualized learning methods and the development of students' self-learning competence. In the process of imparting language knowledge and skills, POA attach great importance to cultivating students' practical

language application and self-learning ability, providing guidance on learning strategies, and gradually improve students' ability to learn independently. Such a teaching concept is not only of benefit to the cultivation of language ability, but also to the improvement of innovation capability.

### **POA increases the writing practice opportunities of English majors**

One of the important features of English comes down to "applicability", and writing is the embodiment of "applicability". In daily writing teaching activities, teachers should actively provide more practice opportunities for students, and guide students to positively participate in various practice activities, so that students can accumulate knowledge and capture available writing information in the progress of participation and experience.

However, the serious imbalance between the accumulation of English language knowledge and the practical application of language is a common phenomenon (Liu Xiaoling, 2015). Most of the students perform well in daily English classes, and their expression skills are also very good. Once they are confronted with thesis writing, they don't know how to start, which gives an illustration of deficiency of practical teaching phase in overall teaching process. Aside from coping with exams, students do not have many real opportunities for English writing practice in the process of foreign language learning. In the paper writing class, there is also a lack of opportunities for exercise, which leads to the lack of solid foundation skills and the difficulty of applying the knowledge points in thesis writing. Therefore, only when we apply teaching theory of POA, can we break through the traditional teaching mode lack of practices in English thesis writing. Using the output to actuate language input, the teaching practice can accordingly achieve language output of higher quality, which is in line with the needs of English writing teaching.

### **Thesis writing course teaching based on POA**

According to the three core stages of POA, the following teaching suggestions are proposed for each stage:

#### **Motivating phase**

The "motivating" stage consists of three links: 1) the teacher presents a communicative scenario; 2) the teacher explains the instructional goal and the output task; 3) students attempt to produce. In the traditional writing course, students try to output outside class, and it is rather difficult for teachers to function as helper and supervisor. POA advocates output as the priority, and output is the learning goal of the classroom, so teachers need to arrange writing tasks in the classroom.

In the thesis writing course, the teacher can present the real scene, that is, the resolution of a certain

language problem in social life, the practical application of a certain linguistic theory, the simulation of choosing topics, the composition of a thesis research, investigation report and other time-limited tasks for a topic. Then the teacher let students manage to complete these activities, which are often challenging. For example, in order to write a short thesis on a specific topic or phenomenon, many students will go ahead by collecting relevant papers in that direction, understand the basic structure and writing mode of the paper. Given that students' existing knowledge reserves and academic ability are not sufficient to achieve this goal, they will have a deeper understanding of their theoretical and academic deficiencies, resulting in a sense of crisis and a stronger need for learning. Next, the teacher proposes teaching objectives and tasks to the students, so that the students can more clearly understand the meaning of the task, and strive to grasp all aspects of knowledge that are lacking in order to accomplish the goal more perfectly.

In addition, in the motivating process, teachers should specifically screen the task cases according to the actual needs of specific teaching purposes, fully considering whether the selected tasks meet the students' current research needs, and whether they can help students to answer the learning problems they encounter, thus strengthening students' understanding and mastery of knowledge points. For the task setting, the teacher should comprehensively consider the three factors of difficulty, topic value and teaching value. In order to make the teaching objective calculable and measurable, topics should not be too wide and too open when teachers design the thesis writing. Accompanied by proper writing training, the teaching can lay a good foundation for students' graduation thesis.

In this process, the teacher can assist the learning activities through the teamwork in assigning the task, and the team leader organizes the group to unite and assist to complete the task. Group learning is an extension from classroom to extracurricular learning. Students scrutinize the relevant texts around the same topic, including monographs and essays, deepen their understanding of the text through communication, and gradually form the entry point and argumentation ideas for the selected topics. It is impossible for students to have in-depth thinking and grasp of all the contents of the course. By assigning tasks, teacher can guide students to go deep into a certain problem and start scientific research. In this process, students' ability to retrieve documents and interpret texts, to inquire into study, to learn cooperatively, to refine ideas, and to design ideas for argumentation has been effectively exercised.

#### **Enabling phase**

"Enabling" phase consists of three main steps: 1) the teacher describes the output task; 2) students

conduct selective learning, and the teacher gives guidance and checks; 3) students exercise to output, the teacher gives guidance and checks. "Enabling", the core link of POA, is also the most important part of the consistency of "using while studying, studying while using" in writing classroom teaching. In the "enabling" phase, the textbook is no longer the "center" of teaching, but the auxiliary facilitating material for the output task. All the teaching activities of the teacher should focus on the output task and take it as the center to achieve the learning purpose of application.

POA advocates that teachers should provide appropriate input materials in a timely manner when students encounter difficulties in expression, and instruct students to selectively learn input materials according to output needs. In the course of teaching thesis writing, the input materials provided by the teachers should conform to the zone of proximal development (ZPD) of the students, which meet the needs of students' English expression so that the students can easily imitate and learn thesis writing from those materials. Therefore, excellent academic journals abroad, preminent English graduation thesis, etc. can be selected as input materials. Students may not grasp which learning content to choose at the outset of selective learning. Teachers need to provide help and counseling in a timely manner through analysis of thesis and brief explanations, hence students can learn thesis writing skills, expression of academic terms and related theoretical knowledge to complete writing tasks.

In the meantime, teachers can give guidance in various forms. For example, it is necessary to instruct students to make full use of the school library network resources to read journals and highly cited papers in the field of linguistics, literature, education, consciously guiding students to learn to search documents in electronic databases through article names, topics, keywords, authors and other search terms, to improve students' comprehensive utilization of electronic resources. Teachers should encourage students to actively use modern information media to express their thoughts and opinions on the problems encountered in learning English, exercise their critical thinking ability, writing ability and language organization ability, and lay a good foundation for writing high-quality graduation thesis.

Finally, teachers can initiate academic communication activities between groups during the task completion process. Each group exchanges the academic problems encountered in the process of completing the task. Students are supposed to be invited to voice their opinions and questions with regard to the background and value of the topic, the purpose of the research, the research content, the basic research thoughts, the research methods and the innovation of the thesis. All groups participate in the discussion aiming to reach a consensus on some standard norms.

Teachers should listen to the report of the team leader, examine whether the students' argumentation is reasonable, whether the research angle is appropriate, whether the literature is sufficient, etc., find problems in time and then make recommendations and adjustments to ensure the quality of the output results in the classroom.

### Assessing phase

Assessing in POA includes both immediate and delayed assessing. The immediate assessing aims at the communication activities and the selective learning process, while the delayed assessing is the evaluation provided by the teacher or teacher and students together after the students submit the articles.

Teachers mostly use quantitative assessing as to students' writing content, but the quantitative evaluation with hierarchical system is too singular, and it fails to fundamentally mobilize the students' enthusiasm for learning. The assessing phase of thesis writing teaching in POA is composed of two parts: teacher evaluation and mutual evaluation among students, which is more likely to reflect the value of students.

To begin with, when the student completes the first draft of the paper, the teacher can organize the students to show the results. The reporting time is strictly limited in the reporting process, and the reporting mode is mainly based on the PPT demonstration and explanation. The teacher and students score respectively in terms of whether the research ideas are clear and novel, whether the thesis argument is profound, whether the arguments are complete, and whether the cited materials are appropriate. Other members of the group can ask questions and give suggestions to improve their ability to find problems. The teacher ponders opinions put forward by students, and brings forward suggestions that need to be revised and improved. On this basis, the teacher can take advantage of different levels of papers to allow students to evaluate each other. Each group exchanges preliminary drafts, discusses and revises drafts according to the assessing criteria proposed by the teachers.

On the basis of the PPT presentation, each group of students completes the writing, revision and finalization of the course papers by themselves. The date of submission is clearly defined, three weeks before the end of the course at the latest. Teachers can use one week to review the paper and give feedback to students one by one. Students will experience the process of modifying the paper and will master and exercise a whole set of thesis writing skills. These feedback sessions are indispensable, as Drake Bock (2012) puts it: "Even if there are many opportunities for students to practice, if teachers don't provide timely and adequate feedback towards their writing content and

quality professionally, they can only make limited progress.” In the last week, the teacher can pick up a few model essays to arouse the enthusiasm of the students, and then organize “centralizedconsultation” and “collective assessing”, from which students actively discover the problems existing in model essays. Eventually, teachers collect the opinions of students, and explain the common problems and solutions in thesis writing, which is an effective form of feedback.

## CONCLUSION

In comparison with the traditional writing teaching method, this article discusses the feasibility of the Production-oriented Approach (POA) in teaching thesis writing of English majors. It can be found that English majors have the ability to complete the output task, and POA can stimulate students’ enthusiasm and initiative for writing thesis and can increase the writing practice opportunities of English majors. Therefore, from the three elements of POA, namely, motivating, enabling and assessing, this paper put forwards viable teaching suggestions based on POA for thesis writing of English majors. Capitalizing on tasks can stimulate students’ desire to express in English and then enable students to realize their own shortcomings. Teaching efficiency should be advanced through input facilitation and selective learning, and immediate and delayed assessing can make up for the disadvantages of traditional evaluation methods. Only from actual situation, should we implement input and output indepth and apply POA in practical teaching course, motivating students’ writing initiative to the hilt, thereby enhancing the academic literacy of English majors.

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