

Telling China's Stories through the Production-Oriented Approach (POA): A Pedagogical Framework for College Spoken English Courses

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Abstract: In the context of China’s call of “telling China’s stories well”, the college spoken English course plays a vital role in cultivating students’ cultural communicative competence to fulfill the mission to present a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China. However, some factors lead to the disjunction between the improvement of students’ linguistic competence and the development of their cultural communicative competence. To bridge the gap, the paper employed the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) to design a targeted teaching framework with a typical unit design, with the hope of providing a feasible way to equip students with the ability to narrate China’s stories well.

1. Introduction

The report of the 20th National Congress emphasizes the necessity and significance of “telling China’s stories well” and making the Chinese voice heard [1]. As the young generation, college students bear the responsibility to show the world a true and comprehensive China and convey Chinese values. In such a context, College English courses, an indispensable part of higher education in Chinese mainland, serve not only as a tool for improving students’ language proficiency but also as a platform for enhancing their capacity for cultural communication.

However, for a long time, the mainstream education in Chinese mainland has been dominated by pedagogical methods characterized as being text-centered and input-centered—both of which generally separate learning from using language[2]. As a result, there is a disconnection between language learning and the cultivation of cultural communicative competence, making it difficult to support the practical needs of “telling China’s stories well”. To overcome the weakness in Chinese English instruction, the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) was proposed and revised. The POA features the teaching principles of “learning-centered”, “learning-using integration”, and “whole-person education” [3]. It involves setting real or simulated scenarios where students are supposed to solve practical problems, thus developing learners’ real-world skills and knowledge.

Some scholars have attempted to integrate “telling China’s stories” into college English courses and conducted both qualitative and quantitative research on how to develop students’ ability to tell China’s stories, but few studies have specifically focused on spoken English teaching. Given that English speaking proficiency is essential for the participation in global communication and a key

carrier for “telling China’s stories well” [4] , it warrants exploring how to improve students’ ability to tell China’s stories well through the college spoken English courses.

2. Current challenges in integrating “telling China’s stories well” into college spoken English courses

The prerequisite of solving a problem is to identify it. The disjunction between linguistic training and cultural transmission stems not merely from pedagogical inefficiency, but from a wide range of factors. The author intends to elaborate on the specific issues that sustain the disjunction from four perspectives—teaching materials, teachers’ dichotomy, evaluation systems, and students’ readiness.

2.1. Teaching materials: the crisis of representation

English education often reinforces Western cultural content while neglecting the expression of Chinese culture, linguistic and cultural displacement[5] . Current textbooks for spoken English are characterized by a strong emphasis on language proficiency. Even when there are cultural notes in these teaching materials, they mainly revolve around western culture, resulting in a deficiency of Chinese culture.

The 2020 College English Education Guidelines emphasizes integrating core educational principles and traditional Chinese culture in textbooks, but risk oversimplifying culture [6] . Some textbooks do incorporate Chinese culture into the content, but mostly the inclusion is tokenistic and conceptual, failing to engage with the underlying cultural meanings. For example, many Chinese elements are included in the topic of “*Traditional Chinese Festivals*” such as the Spring Festival (Chun Jie), mooncakes (Yue Bing), and lanterns (Hua Deng). However, most of the time, the content presented touches upon their conceptual explanation, rarely exploring their profound cultural connotations.

Teaching materials are the basis of English learning. Without a proper amount of presence of Chinese culture, they will not facilitate the cultivation of students’ ability to “tell China’s stories well”.

2.2. Teachers’ dichotomy: language instructor vs. cultural mediator

The advancement of technologies tasks English teachers with greater responsibility and more challenges. English teachers should not only impart knowledge but also ensure successful student learning[7] . Considering the mission to “tell China’s stories well”, English teachers are expected to contribute to students’ improvement of cultural communication. However, many teachers are not equipped with the ability to express their views on native cultures themselves, nor can they fully understand them.

English education in Chinese mainland remains dominated by an exam-oriented approach, with teachers focusing on linguistic knowledge and neglecting cultural teaching[8] . English teachers replicate the training method that they were exposed to during their study, paying much attention to improving students’ language proficiency and omitting the cultural aspect in teaching.

Thus, teacher deficiency—be it in cultural competence or pedagogical skill—severs the fundamental link between acquiring language forms and employing them for cultural communication.

2.3. Evaluation systems: the accuracy-fidelity paradox

Current foreign language teaching practices often constrain learners’ ability to articulate their

native cultural content, limiting their capacity for authentic intercultural exchange [9] . Coupled with the emphasis on linguistic knowledge, students are mainly evaluated based on their grammatical effectiveness, while cultural literacy and cross-cultural communication skills are mostly overlooked.

Teaching evaluation is a process of measuring both the teaching process and results, and making value judgments based on the teaching objectives. It determines, to a certain extent, where the teaching focus should lie. Students normally shape their learning paths based on the outcomes of evaluations. When there is little cultural emphasis in the assessment, both teachers and students will not actively engage in the cultivation of the ability to narrate China's stories well.

2.4. Students' readiness: the duality of linguistic and cultural deficits

Many college students in Chinese mainland have been learning English for many years, yet not all of them are equipped with strong language competence. Constrained by the learning model and the environment, English learners find it especially difficult to improve their spoken English. As a result, college students cannot meet the demand to deliver Chinese culture due to their linguistic deficit.

English learning for many college students in Chinese mainland is exam-driven. They prioritize rote memorization and exam preparation, while neglecting the significance of cultural communication. Consequently, college students are short in in-depth understanding of Chinese culture, thus struggling with applying language skills in cross-cultural scenarios and lacking confidence in intercultural interactions .

The duality of linguistic and cultural deficits leads to students' "Chinese culture aphasia", hindering their articulation of China's stories in any language other than their native tongue[10] .

In a nutshell, the lack of Chinese culture in teaching materials, the teacher's dichotomy, the accuracy-fidelity paradox of evaluation systems, and students' duality of linguistic and cultural deficits give rise to the linguistic-cultural disconnection in college spoken English courses. To address these issues systematically, POA will be introduced to construct a pedagogical framework.

3. POA-driven instructional framework

By integrating the strengths of Western instructional approaches with Chinese contextual features, Pro. Wen developed the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) on the basis of three teaching principles . The first is the learning-centered principle, which urges teachers to make full use of limited classroom time. The second is the learning-using integration principle, which stresses the seamless link between skills. The third is the whole-person education principle, which points out that English language instruction in higher education, with both instrumental objectives and humanistic objectives, should aim to produce socially developed and globally aware citizens. To foster students' humanistic qualities, teachers should carefully select teaching materials and design teaching activities.

All three principles are related not merely to specific teaching design but to broader issues including objective setting and material curating. Therefore, to employ POA to its full potential, the author constructs the instructional framework from three aspects: objective setting, content curation, and specific pedagogical implementation.

3.1. Dual objectives

As a part of college English, the college spoken English course has both instrumental and humanistic functions. Therefore, its objectives should be twofold: linguistic competence and

cultural transmission.

In terms of linguistic competence, institutions and instructors should take into consideration four levels: phonological level, lexical level, discourse level, and pragmatic level, setting specific and clear objectives for each level to equip students with language proficiency to effectively tell China's stories. Apart from basic English knowledge, students should, phonologically, be able to correctly pronounce culture-loaded terms; lexically they should acquire and actively use culture-bound lexical chunks; as for discourse, students should be able to structure oral narratives by applying Chinese "context-first" discourse; pragmatically, students will be able to adopt communication strategies to adjust explanations for audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds.

With regard to cultural transmission, objectives can be set from three dimensions: cultural cognition, cultural representation, and cultural interaction. For cultural cognition, college spoken English course should equip students with the ability to make cultural comparisons critically, in addition to articulating Chinese cultural concepts. When it comes to cultural representation, the course should be set to enable students to incorporate culturally authentic symbols into oral presentations to enhance narrative persuasiveness while adjusting narratives for different audiences. Concerning cultural interaction, students should be demonstrating more advanced skills like cultural conflict meditation and cultural empathy.

Importantly, objective setting should be applied to not only the course from a macro perspective but every unit and even every session from the micro perspective.

3.2. Content curation

Teaching materials are the carriers of linguistic knowledge acquisition and cultural competence cultivation. To familiarize students with rich and varied China's stories, it is necessary to categorize these stories and present them in diverse forms, enabling students to grasp the characteristics and connotations with an overall cognitive framework.

Drawn from China's official documents, four categories of Chinese stories can be framed. The first is "transmission of traditional wisdom". Excellent Chinese traditional culture is the cultural root of the Chinese nation. By integrating traditional cultures like Confucianism and folk arts, the teaching content can better fulfill the mission of "telling China's stories well". The second is "revolutionary legacy and its contemporary values". Without the revolutionary past, there is no vibrant and prosperous life now. Learning about the revolution and its impacts enriches students with the confidence to better make the Chinese voice heard globally. The third is "China's development narratives". Through the lens of individual cases or with the help of graphics, teaching materials should present how China developed along the way, deepening students' understanding of China. The last is "China's approach to global governance". China has always stuck to the construction of the community with a shared future for all humankind. But there are misunderstandings in the international community, which makes it necessary to eliminate misconceptions about China. Naturally, college-level spoken English courses should include content on China's approach to global governance, training students to show what China is really like.

3.3. Pedagogical implementation

Production-Oriented Approach (POA) consists of three teaching phases: motivating, enabling, and assessing. Different from other teaching approaches, POA starts with language production, while input serves as an enabler to help accomplish productive activities by solving problems students encounter.

3.3.1. Motivating phase

As the initial phase of POA, motivating expects teachers to set specific scenarios of tasks to be finished. Plausibly, these scenarios may happen in students' lives. For college spoken English courses, teachers should assign cultural scenario-based productive tasks with diverse forms, such as delivering a speech and recording a video.

Taking “transmission of traditional wisdom” as an example, one topic is “*Traditional Chinese Festivals*”. Students' task is to introduce a traditional festival to foreign friends. A feasible scenario can be:

The school is holding an “international cultural carnival”. Foreign exchange students are curious about traditional Chinese festivals but lack understanding. Students need to create a 3-minute oral introduction (with a simple PPT) to recommend one of the most representative traditional Chinese festivals and explain the cultural connotation.

Students should be asked to try out the task. Based on students' trials, specific deficiencies can be diagnosed, which will be the main focus in the enabling phase. Teachers, therefore, can better prepare students to accomplish the productive task with clearer goals.

3.3.2. Enabling phase

In the enabling phase, teachers explain how the productive tasks are to be accomplished, the enabling materials to be given or searched, and what learning objectives are to be achieved. The teacher divides the productive task into several mini-tasks. With teachers' guidance, students practice mini-productive tasks one after the other.

For instance, the overall productive activity for “*Traditional Chinese Festivals*” is to introduce one festival and explain its cultural connotation. To accomplish this activity, students must first finish two sub-activities—talking about traditional Chinese festivals and explaining their cultural connotations with cultural comparison—that enable them to carry out the longer activity. Accordingly, teachers need to plan at least three sessions of instruction (see Table 1).

Table 1 Overview of Three Planned Sessions

Session 1	linguistic knowledge	Students are asked to introduce festival-related food, customs, clothing, etc.
Session 2	cultural knowledge	Students are asked to introduce festival-related cultural issues and make cultural comparisons.
Session 3	productive task	Students are asked to present their complete introduction.

3.3.3. Assessing phase

There are two kinds of assessment—diagnostic and achievement. The former takes place in the enabling phase when students practice their sub-tasks. The latter refers to the assessment undertaken outside the class to evaluate whether students have achieved the objectives of the unit. For both, teachers should make clear, comprehensible, and easy-to-check criteria. The assessment, based on Production-Oriented Approach (POA), should be conducted collaboratively by both teachers and students. With the emergence of artificial intelligence, new technologies should also be employed to be part of the assessment.

For the oral presentation on “*Traditional Chinese Festivals*”, AI can be used to check how well students have mastered linguistic knowledge and whether their presentation is logical. For self-assessment and peer assessment, the rubric should be brief (see Table 2). The teachers, without doubt, engage in the evaluation throughout the entire process.

Table 2 Criteria for Peer Assessment and Self-Assessment

Criteria for Peer Assessment and Self-Assessment		Yes	No
language	Used culture terms correctly	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Clear pronunciation	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
culture	Explained cultural connotations	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Situated the topic within a broader, nuanced intercultural context	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
presentation	Images with captions	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Interaction with the audience	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. Conclusion

Foreign language learners often seek not only to understand the culture of the target language but also to express their own cultural identities through it. However, the college spoken English course fails to accomplish the mission, resulting in the dis-coupling between students' language proficiency and cultural dissemination ability. This paper reconstructs the teaching framework by integrating cultural communication into the spoken English course under the guidance of POA, trying to figure out a way to improve college students' ability to "tell China's stories well" and enabling them to "present a credible, lovable, and respectable image of China".

While this teaching framework shows great promise in a college spoken English course, it can be applied to other language teaching contexts. Future research can explore the longitudinal effects on students' cross-cultural communication competence and the influence of new technologies on empowering students to articulate China's stories well.

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