

# *The Design and Implementation of Enabling Activities in College English Instruction Based on the Production-Oriented Approach*

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**Abstract:** The Production-Oriented Approach has developed in China for over a decade with the aim of tackling the existing problems of being text-centered and input-based in college English instruction through adopting “learning-using integrated” principle, and the effectiveness of POA has been proved in various previous studies. The present study focuses on enabling, the most crucial and challenging phase in POA instruction, and apply the criteria for effective enabling activities to the design and implementation of enabling activities based on a different textbook and conducted under a different circumstance. And the result from the feedback form and interview of observers and participants and the quality of students’ productive work verified the effectiveness of these criteria. The study is significant in the verification of the designing principles for effective enabling activities and the application and extension of POA theory.

## **1. Introduction**

According to the College English Curriculum Requirements, the objective of College English is to develop students’ ability to use English, enhance cross-cultural awareness and communicative competence, improve the comprehensive cultural quality, and cultivate humanistic spirit and ability. But the college English instruction in China is characterized as being text-centered and input-based, and the consequence of the separation of input and output in college English instruction is that the students just received receptive language knowledge and have limited experience of internalizing and transferring the knowledge in real-life communication, and their language competence can not satisfy the needs of their future employers and the demands of the social and economic development in China.

The Production-Oriented Approach (POA) has developed in China for over a decade with the aim of providing a tentative remedy to the current problems in college English teaching. And previous researches have proved the effectiveness of POA instruction in improving students’ engagement and performance. The present study focuses on the design and implementation of enabling activities, the most crucial phase of POA instruction, applies the criteria for effective enabling to a different textbook and language instruction under a different circumstance, and collects data from the feedback of observers and participants and the quality of students’ productive

work to check the effectiveness of the enabling activities and the guiding criteria. The research result shows that the criteria for enabling activities, including alignment, gradualness and variety, are effective in guiding the design and implementation of enabling activities, and the effectiveness is verified by classroom teaching observers and participants and their production performance.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Previous Studies on POA

Unlike the previous text-centered and input-based college English instruction in China, the most distinctive feature of the POA is the “learning-using integration” principle, so the teaching design focuses on engaging students with the immediate use of the language items learned. The POA emphasizes the function of production in language teaching, and the teaching process of POA starts with productive activities and ends with language production, while the input serves as the enabler to help students accomplish the productive activities. Different from the traditional language instruction of putting the production activity at the end of the unit, the POA instruction inverted the order with the aim of enabling the students to be fully aware of the difficulties they need to tackle in the productive process and motivating their learning interest and desire.

The POA has developed gradually from “output-driven hypothesis” (Wen, 2008) and “an output-driven plus input-enabled hypothesis” (Wen 2013). The POA system was firstly elaborated in 2015(Wen, 2015) and revised twice in 2017 (Wen, 2017). In the final version, the teaching principles of POA are “learning-centered”, “learning-using integration”, “cultural exchange”, and “key abilities”, and the teaching hypotheses include “output-driven”, “input-enabled”, “selective learning” and “assessing as learning”. The teaching procedures consist of three phases: motivating, enabling, and assessing.

Zhang (2016) explained the teaching principles and procedures of POA, applied the theory of POA in college English instruction and analyzed the teaching effect through colleagues’ interview, students’ feedback and the quality of students’ productive work. Yang(2015), Qiu(2017) and Sun(2019) further elaborated the teaching procedures of POA from the aspects of motivating, enabling and assessing, contributing to the expansion of the theory of POA. Cao(2017) and Chen(2020) explored the application of POA in the teaching of different courses under different circumstances, proving the effectiveness of POA and further developed it.

Matsuda(2017) commented that the POA is innovative in the sense that it integrates various ideas and resources to construct an appropriate and effective response to a particular situation in China. Widdowson(2018) commented that POA took local circumstances into consideration and proposed that the central pedagogic question is how to design activities that can enable the transition from the analytic knowledge to the ability to realize discourse intentions. Cumming(2017) suggested three directions for future research of POA, namely, expanding the scale, extending to other contexts and populations, and making a contribution to theories of second language acquisition.

The previous studies further explained the teaching principles and procedures of POA and stretched out the theory of POA in different dimensions, but most of the studies were carried out in key universities based on the textbook iEnglish, and the design and implementation of enabling activities on the basis of different textbooks and carried out in participants of different language proficiency levels were rarely explored. The author’s attempted teaching practice with a focus on the design and implementation of enabling activities, being carried out in a local foreign languages university on the basis of the textbook New Target College English, is expected further explore the central pedagogic question of designing activities to enable the students to achieve the productive objective and make contribution to the the application and extension of POA theory.

## 2.2 Definition of Enabling

Enabling plays a vital role in POA instruction and to some extent determines the efficiency and effectiveness of POA instruction. The teaching procedures of POA consist of three phases: motivating, enabling and assessing. In each unit, a productive activity is designed and used as the unit project. Motivating is the initial phase of each unit, providing a real-life communicative scenario and opportunity for students to try out the productive activity. Enabling refers to the second and the most crucial phase of each unit, in which input materials are selected, transformed and used as the enabler, and scaffolding activities are designed and implemented to enable the students to apply what they have learned to successfully accomplish the productive activity of the unit. Assessing is the last step of each unit, aiming to consolidate the students' knowledge, check whether the learning objectives of the unit are achieved, and serve as an indicator for the teachers' reflection on teaching and adjustment of future instruction.

## 2.3 Criteria for Effective Enabling

Since enabling is the most crucial and challenging phase in POA instruction, to provide guidance for the design and implementation of enabling activities and guarantee the efficiency and effectiveness of POA instruction, Wen(2017) proposed three criteria for effective enabling, namely, alignment, gradualness and variety.

Alignment means that the enabling activities should be aligned with the productive objective of the unit and the students' learning difficulties in the production process. The standard of being aligned with the productive objective indicates that the most relevant content, language, and discourse structure essential for the productive task should be selected and prepared for the students. The standard of being aligned with the productive difficulties emphasizes that overcoming the difficulties in production is essential for the eventual successful completion of the productive task and can help the students gain a sense of accomplishment and motivate stronger learning desire.

Gradualness refers to the gradual process in which teaching activities are designed to narrow the gap between the students' present ability and desired ability, and it emphasizes the gradualness in both the cognitive and linguistic dimensions. Cognitive gradualness means that the processing load of students should gradually increase, from comprehension level to production level. Linguistic gradualness means that the language units used in the teaching process should increase gradually from smaller language units to larger language units.

Variety focuses on the diversity both in instructional form and content. The variety of the instructional form means that the teaching modes, forms of teaching activities and structural organization should be various and diversified. The various teaching modes include text, audio, video and so on. The various forms of teaching include listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities carried out in different forms of brainstorming, mind-mapping, presentation, writing and so on. Variety in structural organization refers to different ways to organize teaching activities, including individual task, pair work, team work and so on. The variety of content means that the unit productive task and sub-tasks should be varied, open and flexible to create opportunities for personalized understanding and expressions through diversified content, language use and discourse structures.

### **3. Research Design**

#### **3.1 Research Background**

The research was conducted in a foreign languages university in southeastern China and the participants were non-English major sophomores. The POA teaching was carried out in the fourth semester of the Integrated English course. The textbook is New Target College English, which is designed to meet the multi-objectives proposed in the College English Curriculum Requirements and cater for the needs of students with different language proficiency levels.

Unit 3 of Book 4 was chosen as the teaching material. The topic is Green Movement in Architecture and Text A focuses on the characteristics and the development of organic modernist architecture. So the productive objective of the unit was set to be designing an organic dream house, and the sub-objectives were designed as follows: 1. memorizing and applying the architectural vocabularies; 2. describing the features of organic architecture; 3. explaining the underlying principles of organic architecture; 4. designing and describing an organic dream house.

The productive scenario was designed as follows: To celebrate the World Environment Day, China Daily launched a contest of organic architecture design, with the aim of enhancing public awareness of environmental protection and promoting a harmonious relationship between human beings and the environment. The participants of the contest are asked to work in teams and submit a picture of their design, attached with a passage of description of the characteristics, principles and benefits of the design .

According to the teaching syllabus of the Integrated English course, each unit is finished within 8 periods in two weeks. The POA instruction was implemented within 8 periods, one period for motivating, 6 periods for enabling, and 1 period left for assessing.

#### **3.2 Research Questions**

Since the research focus is the design and implementation of enabling activities under the POA framework, the research questions are: 1) How to apply the theoretical principles and criteria of effective enabling activities in instructional design? 2) Is the design and implementation of the enabling activities effective?

#### **3.3 Data Collection and Analysis**

Research data was collected mainly from two perspectives: the feedback of observers and participants, and the students' productive work. Three experienced associate professors were invited to observe the classroom teaching or watch the video of the classroom teaching recorded, and were asked to fill in a form concerning the effectiveness of the design and the implementation of enabling activities, followed by a semi-structured interview. And the participants were asked to fill in a form concerning their impression of enabling activities and share their opinions in the following focus interviews of some selected students. And the students' productive works were examined in the three dimensions of content, language and discourse structure.

### **4. Enabling Activities**

#### **4.1 The Design of Enabling Activities**

As can be seen in Table 1, the enabling activities were divided into four phases based on the four

sub-objectives set previously. And the enabling materials and activities concerning the three aspects of language, content and discourse structure were included and integrated in the four phases, while the criteria of alignment, gradualness and variety were also taken into consideration and followed strictly in the design of enabling activities.

*Table 1: The design of enabling activities*

	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4
Sub-objectives	Memorizing and applying the architectural vocabularies	Describing the features of organic architecture	Explaining the principles of organic architecture	Designing and describing an organic dream house
Complementary teaching materials	Different architectural styles	Article about organic architecture	Documentary film: The design of Fallingwater	Listening passage: Logan's dream house
Enabling activities	Matching & translating	Picture describing	Outlining the principles	Designing & mind-mapping
The focus of enabling	Language & content	Language & content	Content & discourse structure	Content

#### 4.1.1 Memorizing and Applying the Architectural Vocabularies

The first step was memorizing and applying the architectural vocabularies. In this phase of enabling, the students were provided with background information of different architectural styles in the west and east throughout history to get a general understanding of what architecture is. And special attention was drawn to the selected words and phrases about architecture that would help them in the future productive work. Since students were not familiar with the area of architecture, architectural vocabulary was predicted to be one of the important productive difficulties for students and tackled in the first phase of enabling activities. To lower students' memorizing load, the selected vocabularies were classified into two categories based on the level of difficulty and frequency of usage. For the ones they just need to recognize in reading and listening, a matching task was designed to check their understanding; for the ones need to be mastered and applied in the future productive work, a sentence translation task was designed to check their ability to put the related vocabularies into use. The main focus of the first enabling phase was to enable students in the dimensions of language and content.

#### 4.1.2 Describing the Features of Organic Architecture

The second step was describing the features of organic architecture. In this phase, complementary reading materials were provided, and picture describing task was designed to provide students an opportunity to put what they learned into use. Considering organic architecture is a new and complex term for students, an article about organic architecture with typical examples and vivid illustrations was chosen as the complementary teaching material to enable the students to get a clear picture of what organic architecture is. The students were asked to read the related paragraphs of Text A and the complementary article, and then they were divided into several teams and asked to choose one from the typical examples of organic architecture and work in teams to identify the main features of organic architecture they chose and describe the features in their own words. Considering the different levels of language proficiency of the teams, the students were allowed to choose from describing the organic architecture with or without key words, with the purpose of lowering their cognitive and linguistic load of processing. The main focus of the second enabling phase was to enable students in the dimensions of language and content, and the different leaning needs and language proficiency levels are also taken into consideration in the design.

### **4.1.3 Explaining the Underlying Principles of Organic Architecture**

The third step is explaining the underlying principles of organic architecture, in which process the students were asked to learn about the principles underlying the design of organic architecture and explain the principles governing the design of organic architecture. In this phase, a documentary film about Fallingwater was selected as the complementary teaching material and introduced to the students. Fallingwater is a representative work of organic architecture designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, the great architect who proposed and advocated the philosophy of organic architecture. The students were asked to watch the video clip and identify the principles underlying the design of Fallingwater and read the related passages about the principles of organic architecture in Text A. Afterwards, the students were asked to work out an outline to describe the principles of organic architecture. To enable them to write a cohesive passage, the conjunctions for listing were provided, emphasized, practiced and consolidated in a blank-filling exercise. The main focus of the third enabling phase was to enable students in the dimensions of content and discourse structure.

### **4.1.4 Designing and describing an organic dream house**

The fourth step is working in teams to design an organic dream house and describe it. In this phase, a listening passage of Logan's dream house was selected as the complementary teaching material and the students were asked to listen to the passage and list the benefits of an organic house. Subsequently, the team members were asked to cooperate with each other to apply the designing principles of organic architecture and design their own dream house. The students would work together to draw a mind map of their organic dream house, with a picture of the dream house and key words describing the main features and benefits of the design. The main focus of the fourth enabling phase was to enable students in the dimension of content.

## **4.2 Rationale behind Design**

As for the alignment of the design of enabling activities, the sub-activities of memorizing and applying the related architectural vocabularies, describing the features of organic architecture, explaining the underlying principles of organic architectures were all aiming at the productive activity of the unit, designing and describing an organic dream house. And the learning difficulties were analyzed to be the architectural vocabularies and conjunctions in writing, and were tackled respectively in the first and third enabling activity.

As for the gradualness of the design of enabling activities, in the cognitive dimension, the processing load was gradually increasing from memorizing, applying, describing, explaining to designing; while in the linguistic dimension, the linguistic units are enlarging from vocabularies, sentences to passages.

As for the variety of the design of enabling activities, from the perspective of various teaching forms, various teaching modes were integrated, including text, video and audio, and various teaching activities were designed, from reading, listening, outlining to mind-mapping, and these activities were carried out in different structural organizations from individual task to team work; while from the perspective of the variety of teaching content, openness and flexibility were taken into consideration to allow the students to be make full use of their imagination and creativity in the designing of their organic dream house and the drawing of the mind map.



## 5. Effectiveness of Enabling

### 5.1 Observer and Participant Feedback

The data from the classroom observation forms and students' feedback forms were collected and analyzed, supplemented by the comments and suggestions in the semi-structured interview of classroom observers and the focus interview of classroom participants.

From the perspective of alignment, both the observers and participants mentioned that the reading input and vocabulary exercises of matching and sentence translation in the first enabling activity helped to tackle one of the most important and difficult points in the completion of the productive activity of the unit, the architectural vocabularies. And the recurrence of these vocabularies in the following watching and listening materials helped to consolidate these vocabularies, improve the efficiency of learning and enhance the students' sense of accomplishment. The students mentioned "a very clear learning objective", "high efficiency", "helped to memorize the vocabularies" and "left a very deep impression" in the feedback.

From the perspective of gradualness, the observers recognized the cognitive gradualness from lower cognitive levels to higher cognitive levels, less processing load to more processing load, and believed that the design could help relieve the students' stress and anxiety in the completion of the productive activity and improve the quality of their productive work. The students gave positive feedback concerning the linguistic gradualness from vocabulary, sentences to passages, and commented that "it is easier to master and digest", "step by step", "gradually gained confidence in language production".

From the perspective of variety, both the observers and participants noticed the variety in the forms of teaching materials, teaching activities and the structural organization of the teaching. Apart from those, the observers mentioned "diverse and flexible" and "creative thinking", and participants mentioned "relaxing and interesting" and "willing to participate" in their feedback form and interview.

### 5.2 Production Performance

The language production of the students were analyzed from the perspectives of content, language terms and structure. As far as the content is concerned, 87.5% of the teams successfully accomplished the task of describing the features of organic architecture and explaining the underlying principles. From the perspective of language terms, of the 20 potential applicable terms provided and consolidated in the teaching process, an average of 13.2 language terms were applied in students' works. As for the structure, 86% of the students were able to list the features and principles of organic architecture in a clear and logical way with the help of proper conjunctions.

## 6. Conclusion

The present study attempted to put the POA instruction into practice and focused on the design and implementation of enabling activities. Based on the close examination of the hypothesis, principles and procedures of POA instruction and a deep understanding of the criteria for effective enabling activities, namely, alignment, gradualness and variety, the author attempted to design and implement enabling activities based on a different textbook, and the feedback and interview of the observers and participants and the examination of the students' productive work verified the effectiveness of the design and implementation of enabling activities and the criteria for effective enabling. The present study is significant in applying the theory of POA instruction to a different

textbook and a different context with the research focus on enabling activities and verifying the effective of the guiding principles. Further and deeper studies of enabling activities are still needed to verify the criteria for effective enabling activities and expand the theory of POA.

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