Effects of Production-Oriented Approach on English Speaking Anxiety Among Non-English Major College Students

Xiao Wang*

Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, Gansu, China

*Author to whom correspondence should be addressed.

Abstract: This study investigated the influence of the production-oriented approach on English speaking anxiety among non-English major college students. A quasi-experimental design was implemented over one semester with two parallel classes of junior students at a university in northwestern China. Data collected before and after the intervention using a validated Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale indicated that students experiencing POA instruction showed a discernible decrease in overall speaking anxiety, particularly concerning communication apprehension and fear of negative evaluation, relative to peers instructed via the audio-lingual method. Analysis highlighted task-driven learning, scaffolded input facilitation, and formative process evaluation within the POA framework as contributing factors. Findings imply POA represents a potential pedagogical framework for addressing affective challenges in the development of EFL oral skills.

Keywords: Production-oriented approach; English speaking anxiety; College English teaching

1. Introduction

Developing oral proficiency presents an ongoing challenge for many learners of English as a foreign language, especially non-English majors within higher education. Speaking anxiety, a specific type of language anxiety centered on oral communication apprehension, is widely acknowledged as a considerable barrier to language acquisition and performance. Learners experiencing heightened anxiety frequently demonstrate avoidance behaviors, diminished participation, and impaired cognitive processing during speaking activities. This hinders communicative competence development and negatively influences overall language learning motivation and outcomes [1]. In the Chinese EFL context, conventional teacher-centered methodologies, often emphasizing receptive skills and grammatical precision over productive use and communicative fluency, may unintentionally intensify such anxiety [2]. Consequently, investigating pedagogical approaches that effectively integrate language learning with meaningful application while mitigating learner anxiety is essential. The production-oriented

approach (POA), developed to address perceived disconnects between learning and application in Chinese foreign language education, positions output as both the catalyst for learning and the ultimate instructional goal, underpinned by carefully selected input and collaborative evaluation [3]. This study aimed to empirically examine the effects of implementing POA principles on reducing English speaking anxiety among non-English major undergraduates, contributing to understanding how task-based, output-driven methodologies influence affective states.

2. Literature review

Speaking anxiety, a facet of foreign language anxiety, constitutes a well-documented phenomenon within second language acquisition research. It refers specifically to the apprehension, worry, and nervousness associated with real-time oral communication in a target language within learning contexts. Learners often perceive speaking as inherently stressful due to its public, spontaneous, and evaluative nature, where errors are immediately observable. This perception frequently leads to self-consciousness, fear of negative judgment from peers and instructors, and a reluctance to engage in spoken interaction. Empirical studies consistently associate elevated levels of English speaking anxiety with reduced speaking performance, decreased classroom participation, shorter utterances, and avoidance of speaking opportunities, ultimately impeding oral skill development. Foundational work by Horwitz *et al.* [4] established the conceptual framework for understanding this phenomenon.

Research identifies multiple factors contributing to English speaking anxiety. Learner-internal factors encompass personality traits, where introverted or perfectionistic individuals often report higher anxiety, self-perceived language competence, with lower self-efficacy correlating strongly with increased apprehension, and a pronounced fear of negative evaluation, a significant stressor in performance-oriented settings [5]. Externally, pedagogical factors exert considerable influence. Traditional methods, such as the audio-lingual method emphasizing pattern drills and memorization, or teacher-centered grammar-translation methods, while potentially building declarative knowledge, often fail to provide sufficient, low-stakes opportunities for authentic, meaningful oral practice. An excessive focus on accuracy during speaking tasks, coupled with immediate error correction, can heighten learners' fear of making mistakes. Furthermore, large class sizes, limited time allocated for oral practice within curricula, and assessment systems heavily favoring written examinations over oral proficiency can devalue speaking practice and amplify anxiety. These elements collectively foster an environment where affective barriers hinder the development of the communicative skills curricula aim to cultivate. The nature of assessment itself, particularly high-stakes summative evaluations focused narrowly on accuracy under timed conditions, constitutes a distinct and potent source of anxiety for many learners, often termed test anxiety within the language learning context. This anticipatory stress regarding formal evaluation can paralyze performance and distort learners' perceptions of their actual communicative abilities. Swain [6] offered early insights into the role of output in language development, relevant to addressing such barriers.

The production-oriented approach draws theoretical support from the Output Hypothesis, which contends that language production compels learners towards deeper linguistic processing and helps identify gaps in their interlanguage system, and Sociocultural Theory, underscoring the importance of scaffolding and social interaction in learning. POA is structured around three interconnected, iterative phases. The Driving phase initiates the learning cycle by presenting learners with a purposeful communicative output task situated within

a potentially relevant context. This aims to stimulate a genuine need to use the language and activate prior knowledge. The Enabling phase provides essential scaffolding. Instructors curate and present pertinent input materials, guide learners in selectively processing this input to extract necessary content, language forms, and discourse structures required for the output task, and facilitate practice through structured sub-tasks. The Assessing phase involves learners presenting their output and receiving formative feedback from peers and the instructor, focusing on communicative effectiveness alongside linguistic accuracy, with structured opportunities for revision. This cyclical process seeks to tightly integrate learning through input processing with application through output production, fostering a sense of purpose and gradually building confidence via scaffolded practice and constructive evaluation. Crucially, the POA framework inherently deemphasizes high-stakes, summative testing in favor of ongoing, developmental assessment integrated within the learning cycle, potentially mitigating anticipatory evaluation anxiety. Research by Young [7] and Woodrow [8] further supports the importance of pedagogical design in managing classroom anxiety.

3. Research design

3.1. Research participants

The study involved eighty junior-year, non-English major students enrolled in a compulsory College English course at a university in northwestern China. Participants were drawn from two intact classes within the same academic program. Prior to the intervention, equivalence was established. University entrance English scores and scores from previous college English courses showed no significant difference between the classes, confirmed by independent samples *t*-tests. Pre-test anxiety scores also indicated no significant difference. The classes were randomly designated as the experimental group and the control group, each containing forty students. The average age of participants was 20.3 years, with forty-five female and thirty-five male students distributed relatively evenly across both groups. All participants understood that course content delivery would vary between the groups as part of the research design.

3.2. Research instruments

The primary instrument was an adapted version of the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale (FLCAS) [4], focusing explicitly on dimensions relevant to oral production. Communication apprehension measured anxiety related to speaking in class. Fear of negative evaluation gauges apprehension about being judged poorly by others. Test anxiety, specifically concerning oral performance evaluations, was also assessed through relevant scale items. The scale comprised items rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Its reliability was high, with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.86, indicating strong internal consistency for the sample. Anxiety levels were interpreted based on mean scores. Scores at or below 2.4 signified low anxiety. Scores between 2.5 and 3.4 indicated moderate anxiety. Scores at or above 3.5 signified high anxiety. This scale was administered as a pre-test at the semester's outset and as a post-test following the sixteen-week intervention. Qualitative feedback was gathered anonymously from the experimental group post-intervention using open-ended questions designed to elicit student perceptions of the POA process and its specific impact on different dimensions of their English speaking anxiety, including apprehension related to formal assessment situations.

3.3. Research procedures

This study employed a quasi-experimental design to explore the effects of POA-based instruction on English

speaking anxiety. Both groups received identical instruction hours weekly and used the same core textbook. The same instructor, possessing over ten years of college English teaching experience and having received specific training in both the audio-lingual method and POA implementation, taught both groups to rigorously control for teacher effects. The instructor maintained detailed teaching logs for both groups to ensure adherence to the respective methodological protocols.

Instruction for the control group adhered strictly to the audio-lingual method. This involved structured pattern drills, repetition exercises, memorization of textbook dialogues, and grammar-focused exercises based on unit content. Opportunities for spontaneous oral production were minimal and typically involved recitation or highly controlled responses. Teacher feedback primarily targeted the accuracy of discrete language points such as vocabulary usage and grammatical structures. Oral performance assessment consisted primarily of summative end-of-unit oral tests focusing on accuracy and pronunciation of memorized dialogues or sentences, contributing significantly to the final grade.

The experimental group received instruction structured according to POA principles over the sixteen-week semester. Each unit cycle followed the three-phase process. During the Driving phase, the instructor presented a communicative oral task aligned with the unit theme and designed for potential real-world relevance, clearly outlining the task goals and criteria. Students analyzed task demands and anticipated required language and content, establishing the purpose for learning. The Enabling phase featured the instructor providing curated listening and reading input materials selected for their relevance to the output task. Students engaged in instructor-guided selective learning activities to extract essential information, language patterns, and discourse structures. Scaffolding was provided through structured sub-tasks. These included collaborative summarization of input, contextualized practice of specific language chunks in pairs or small groups, and preparation of segments contributing to the final output. The instructor acted as a facilitator, offering targeted support as needed, focusing on enabling successful task completion rather than immediate perfection. The Assessing phase included student presentations or performances of their oral output, often in small groups or through recordings initially. Feedback was provided collaboratively by peers and the instructor using predefined criteria emphasizing content coherence, task achievement, language appropriateness, fluency, and delivery, with comments framed constructively. Structured opportunities for revision based on the feedback received were an integral component of this phase, allowing students to refine their output. Formative assessment, based on documented participation, completion, and quality of enabling sub-tasks, quality of peer feedback, and the revised final output quality, continuously informed the learning process and constituted the primary basis for the final course evaluation, minimizing reliance on high-stakes summative oral exams.

Quantitative data from the anxiety scale were analyzed using SPSS software Version 26. Independent samples t-tests compared anxiety levels between groups before and after the intervention. Paired samples t-tests examined changes within each group over time for the overall anxiety score and the three sub-factors. Qualitative feedback was analyzed thematically to identify recurring perceptions related to anxiety reduction.

4. Results and discussion

Analysis of pre-test data confirmed initial group equivalence regarding English speaking anxiety. The mean overall anxiety score for all participants was 3.30, situated within the moderate anxiety range. Among the sub-factors, Fear of negative evaluation registered the highest mean score at 3.41, followed by communication apprehension at 3.25, and test anxiety at 3.28. Independent samples t-tests revealed no statistically significant

differences between groups on overall anxiety or any of the sub-factors before the intervention commenced, with *P* values > 0.05 for all comparisons.

4.1. Alleviation of communication apprehension

Analysis of post-test data revealed differing trajectories between the groups. Paired samples *t*-tests within the experimental group indicated a statistically significant decrease in communication apprehension. The mean score decreased substantially from 3.30 to 2.95. This reduction was significantly greater than that observed in the control group, where communication apprehension scores remained relatively stable. Qualitative feedback from the experimental group offered rich insights into this change. Approximately 70% of respondents explicitly reported that the scaffolded progression through the POA cycle contributed significantly to their increased willingness to speak. Students frequently mentioned that the Enabling phase sub-tasks, particularly collaborative work in pairs and small groups, provided safer, lower-pressure spaces to practice specific language elements and receive peer support before the potentially more daunting final presentation. The structured preparation over time seemed to build confidence incrementally. Knowing the specific output task and its criteria from the outset allowed students to focus their preparation efforts effectively, reducing the unpredictability and associated anxiety often triggered by spontaneous speaking demands. The collaborative nature of many sub-tasks also lessened the feeling of isolation when speaking, fostering a sense of shared endeavor. This finding aligns robustly with the theoretical premise that repeated, structured practice in supportive, collaborative environments can enhance self-efficacy and progressively reduce apprehension about oral communication.

4.2. Reduction in fear of negative evaluation

The experimental group also demonstrated a statistically significant reduction in fear of negative evaluation. The mean score decreased notably from 3.41 to 2.85. This decrease was significantly greater than the minimal and non-significant change observed in the control group. Student feedback illuminated the mechanisms behind this finding. Around 78% of experimental group respondents indicated that the formative and collaborative nature of the Assessing phase was crucial in reducing their fear of judgment. The explicit shift from solely instructor-led correction focusing predominantly on errors to a process involving structured peer feedback emphasizing improvement, task achievement, content coherence, and constructive suggestions reportedly reduced the fear of harsh, public criticism. Knowing that feedback aimed explicitly at development and that tangible opportunities existed for revision based on that feedback created a demonstrably less threatening environment for performance. The consistent use of clear, predefined criteria for evaluation also made expectations transparent, reducing uncertainty about how performance would be judged and demystifying the assessment process. Several students explicitly stated that receiving constructive suggestions from peers felt significantly less intimidating than direct correction from the teacher in front of the whole class, as it felt more like mutual support. This suggests that POA's emphasis on collaborative evaluation, constructive criteria, and the revision process can effectively address the potent anxiety source of fearing negative evaluation by reframing feedback as an essential tool for growth rather than merely a summative assessment of failure.

4.3. Mitigation of test anxiety

Concurrently, the experimental group exhibited a significant decrease in test anxiety specifically related to oral performance evaluation, with the mean score declining from 3.28 to 2.65. In contrast, the control group, whose oral assessment relied heavily on summative end-of-unit performance tests, showed no significant

change. Qualitative feedback from the experimental group strongly supported this quantitative shift. Over 63% of respondents highlighted the reduction in pressure associated with the shift from high-stakes summative oral exams to continuous, formative assessment integrated within the POA cycle. Students reported feeling less overwhelmed by the prospect of a single, decisive performance test. The process of receiving feedback on drafts or preliminary outputs during the Assessing phase, followed by the opportunity to revise before the final evaluation, significantly lowered anticipatory anxiety. Knowing that their final grade reflected sustained effort, progress, participation in enabling tasks, and the quality of their revised output based on feedback, rather than a single, potentially flawed performance under pressure, was frequently cited as alleviating stress. One student remarked that "before the final oral test felt like walking a tightrope but now it felt more like showing how improvement occurred through practice and feedback." This dimension underscores how POA's integrated assessment approach, replacing isolated high-stakes testing with ongoing, developmental evaluation focused on progress and task completion, directly targets and reduces the specific anxiety stemming from formal, summative evaluation situations.

5. Conclusion

This study offers evidence indicating the potential of the production-oriented approach to alleviate multiple dimensions of English speaking anxiety among non-English major college students. Compared to an audio-lingual methodology, POA instruction was associated with discernible and statistically significant reductions in overall speaking anxiety, with pronounced effects observable on communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and test anxiety specifically related to oral performance assessment. The integrated POA cycle addresses these key anxiety sources through distinct mechanisms. The purposeful, task-driven nature shifts focus away from self-evaluation towards goal achievement. Scaffolded enabling activities build linguistic and pragmatic competence incrementally, fostering confidence. Collaborative formative assessment within the Assessing phase, emphasizing constructive feedback and revision, demonstrably reduces the perceived threat of judgment. Crucially, the frameworks replacement of high-stakes summative oral tests with continuous, process-oriented evaluation directly mitigates anticipatory test anxiety. Its significant contribution lies in fostering a more supportive, purposeful, and developmentally focused environment for acquiring oral communication skills. Implementing POA effectively requires careful attention to authentic task design, strategic input selection, appropriate scaffolding provision, and cultivating a constructive classroom feedback culture centered on growth. Future research could explore the persistence of anxiety reduction through POA over longer periods, its effectiveness across diverse learner profiles such as varying proficiency levels or personality types and institutional contexts, and strategies for aligning communicative skill development objectives with formal institutional assessment demands. Addressing affective dimensions, particularly multifaceted speaking anxiety, through theoretically grounded pedagogies like POA is vital for nurturing not only linguistic ability but also the essential confidence and willingness to use English for meaningful communication.

Disclosure statement

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