Pacific International Journal, Vol. 9(3); 2026
ISSN (Print) 2663-8991, ISSN (Online) 2616-4825[1]
DOI:10.55014/pij.v9i3.1023
https://rclss.com/index.php/pij

A Case Study on the Impact of Production-Oriented Approach Empowered by Artificial Intelligence on IELTS Speaking Performance

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Abstract: As a localized teaching theory, Production-Oriented Approach (POA) provides important inspirations for foreign language teaching, while the development of generative artificial intelligence tools has also brought new supporting approaches to oral English teaching. This paper combines the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) with AI tools, and conducts a 6-week teaching practice on a college student with relatively weak IELTS speaking foundation but strong learning motivation. This study adopts a case study method, and explores the application process of POA enabled by AI in IELTS speaking teaching and learners' feedback through means including oral transcription analysis, interviews and questionnaires. The results show that the learner has exhibited positive changes in IELTS speaking scores, expression fluency and learning attitude, and has gradually developed the habit of conducting independent oral practice with the assistance of AI tools. Since this study is a single case study, the relevant results are more suitable to serve as an exploratory case of AI-enabled POA-based speaking teaching, and provide references for subsequent larger-scale studies.

Keywords: Production-oriented Approach (POA); Spoken English Teaching; IELTS English; AI (Artificial Intelligence)

1. Introduction

According to the British Council's "2024-2025 IELTS Candidate Score Big Data Report in Mainland China", speaking is still a challenge for most candidates, with an average score of 5.5. As a globally recognised authoritative English test, it also reflects that Chinese candidates have been "more input and less output" for a long time. They open their mouths less, are afraid of making mistakes, and express themselves unnaturally. In the face of real examiners, they are easily nervous and stuck. Part 2 often relies on memorising templates, and the content is stiff. Part 3 is difficult to carry out in-depth discussions. The logic is thin, the vocabulary and sentence patterns are single, and pronunciation and fluency often become points. In order to solve the "separation of learning and use" and "separation of literature and literature" caused by the traditional English teaching mode, Wen Qiufang of Beijing Foreign Studies University has built an output-oriented method (POA) to improve teaching efficiency and students' real communication ability by integrating output-driven, input promotion, and learning-use integration[1] . Therefore, it is of practical significance to apply the output-oriented method to IELTS oral teaching.

Production-Oriented Approach (POA) is the original local foreign language teaching theory of Chinese scholars. After more than ten years of iterative improvement by Professor Wen Qiufang's team, it has accurately responded to the pain points of traditional foreign language teaching and has become a very influential teaching paradigm in the field of language education at home and abroad. Its theory began with the output-driven hypothesis. In response to the reform of English professional skills courses, Wen Qiufang put forward the core view that output precedes input and output drives language learning for the first time, breaking the teaching logic dominated by traditional input and laying the core idea for the theoretical foundation[2] . In 2015, the output-oriented method officially formed a complete theoretical system. Wen Qiufang systematically built the core structure of the teaching concept, teaching hypothesis and teaching process, marking the standardisation of the POA 1.0 version and becoming a milestone in the development of the theory[1]. Since then, the theory has been continuously optimised and upgraded. Wen Qiufang launched the POA 2.0 version, adding the assumption of "promoting learning through evaluation", strengthening the leading role of teachers in teaching, improving the closed-loop teaching process of "driving-promoting-evaluation", and making the theory more practical[3].

The foundation of college students' foreign language communication ability is weak, and their instant communication ability is related to professional competitiveness. The IELTS oral test precisely reflects students' instant communication ability. Wen Qiufang proposed to build an online and offline integrated teaching model by relying on AI technology, and adopt the AI empowerment mode of "online preparation + offline dominance" for instant communication ability, so as to realise the collaborative cultivation of instant communication ability and non-instant communication ability[4]. For the first time, this model distinguishes between two communication abilities and adapts to different integration modes, allowing AI to participate in the cultivation process of each ability throughout the whole process, and realising the organic connection of online and offline activities. This article tries to use AI to empower POA to conduct IELTS oral teaching experiments for college students to explore its effect.

2. Research Subjects and Methods

2.1 Research Subject

The research participant is a third-year undergraduate student majoring in law at Inner Mongolia University, who took the IELTS test in the first semester of the third academic year (January 2026). The student obtained an overall band score of 7.0 in IELTS, with 8.5 in reading, 6.5 in listening, 7.0 in writing and 5.5 in speaking, which corresponds to the C1

[Received 14 April 2026; Accepted 15 May 2026; Published (online) 20, June, 2026]

proficiency level defined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages. This meets the requirement proposed by Wen that teaching participants should be intermediate-advanced foreign language learners with an English proficiency of at least A2 level[1]. At the time of the study, the student rated his/her overall English proficiency relatively highly, but made the following comment on his/her oral English performance: the student did not know how to respond to examiners' questions appropriately, and was overly preoccupied with improving scores by using advanced grammar and vocabulary, which ultimately led to reduced fluency. The student holds a positive attitude towards AI tools, but has never used AI tools for oral English practice. Instead, the student has only used AI tools to assist in revising IELTS writing tasks and obtain real-time feedback. According to the instructor's evaluation, the student has a solid English foundation, decent pronunciation and strong learning motivation. However, the student exhibits poor fluency in oral expression, with frequent pauses and hesitations, and often misuses complex sentence patterns which leads to comprehension difficulties.

2.2 Research Problem

This study adopts a case study approach to investigate the application process of the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) enabled by AI tools in IELTS speaking instruction, with a focus on the following three research questions: 1. What changes occur in learners' speaking performance throughout the 6-week teaching practice. 2. What are learners' perceptions of the role of AI tools in IELTS speaking learning. 3. What potential advantages and limitations may emerge when applying AI-enabled POA in the case-based speaking instruction.

2.3 Reserch Menthod

This study adopts three methods: comparative analysis, questionnaire survey and semi-structured individual interview. Specifically, this study transcribes the participant’s oral responses and analyzes changes in lexical diversity, grammatical diversity and grammatical accuracy by comparing the participant’s oral performance before and after the instruction. A questionnaire survey is conducted to investigate the participant’s attitude towards learning English with AI tools, and an interview is carried out to analyze the participant’s learning methods, perceived oral proficiency and overall learning gains.

It should be noted that this study is a single case study (N=1) without a control group. Therefore, the research findings cannot be directly interpreted as a definite causal effect that AI-enabled POA improves IELTS speaking scores. Changes in the learner’s test performance may also be affected by factors such as increased test familiarity, repeated practice effects, other English learning experiences and natural language development. Accordingly, this paper focuses more on presenting the implementation process of the instruction and the changes observed in the learner, so as to provide a case reference for subsequent relevant research.

3. Teaching Process

The oral instruction is designed in accordance with the POA (Production-Oriented Approach) framework of "motivating-enabling-assessing." The six-week teaching program adopts a blended learning model, integrating online and offline components, and requires students to utilize AI tools to complete instructor-assigned tasks offline.

3.1 Design of the Motivating Process

First of all, by presenting students with the official IELTS speaking band scores and corresponding marking criteria released by the IELTS authority, students are enabled to understand the proficiency requirements for different band scores across the four assessment dimensions: Fluency and Coherence, Lexical Resource, Grammatical Range and Accuracy, and Pronunciation. Official IELTS speaking demonstration recordings are played to allow students to intuitively experience the test performance of candidates with different band scores, and recognize the gap between their own oral proficiency and that of high-scoring candidates. In accordance with the three sections of the IELTS speaking test, one topic category within a section is covered in every two-week teaching cycle. The target band score is adjusted upward continuously based on the observed changes in students' proficiency, and students' output practice is driven by the requirements of the target band score. Through students' after-class practice with artificial intelligence and the feedback generated therefrom, teachers summarize students' problems and screen the feedback provided by AI. Requirements for teaching content that is not urgently needed for output can be lowered, or such content can even be suspended from the teaching schedule[5], so as to clarify teaching objectives and output-oriented tasks.

3.2 Design of the Enabling Process

The enabling stage constitutes a critical link in embodying the teacher’s leading role[6]. Enabling is not equivalent to “didactic instruction”; instead, it must align with students’ evolving needs and progress collaboratively with learners.

In the content-enabling stage, the instructor constructs expressive frameworks, and provides learners with linguistic corpora and model examples for reference when addressing topics that are unfamiliar to students. For instance, when explaining the Part 1 task in the speaking test, students are clarified that Part 1 is merely a warm-up section, which requires concise and complete answers instead of lengthy elaboration, and 2 to 3 sentences are sufficient for responses. A standard expressive framework for this section can be structured as direct response to the question plus supporting reason.

In the language-enabling stage, instructors provide topic-specific vocabulary, sentence patterns and grammatical materials in light of students’ existing problems and feedback generated by AI. To reinforce learners’ memorization, instructors encourage students to conduct simulated dialogues with AI, and guide them to appropriately express their intended ideas using the vocabulary and sentence patterns they have acquired. In addition to in-class pronunciation correction, instructors assist students in selecting appropriate audio materials for shadowing practice after class to improve their pronunciation, intonation and prosody.

In the discourse structure-enabling stage, instructors provide a repertoire of cohesive devices for students to use when they experience hesitation, so as to help them organize their utterances more effectively. Through employing cohesive devices to connect all components within the constructed framework, students are instructed to read their complete

responses aloud to achieve natural logical connection and fluent expression. Meanwhile, instructors elaborate on oral English skills including pausing and stress placement to further enhance learners' oral fluency.

3.3 Design of the Assessing Process

Three evaluation methods are adopted in this study. In class, the teacher takes the lead in evaluating students' oral performance, identifying deficiencies and providing improvement approaches. After class, a combination of student self-assessment and AI-based assessment is implemented. When practicing after class, students record their own oral audio, replay it, and score themselves in accordance with the official IELTS speaking band scoring criteria. They then submit the audio together with the official IELTS speaking scoring criteria to an AI tool for scoring, which is required to output a detailed breakdown of the score, indicate the gap between the student's performance and the requirements for the target band score, and provide corresponding improvement suggestions. Finally, students submit the feedback generated by the AI tool to the course teacher, and the teacher and students collaborate to organize and summarize the evaluation results.

4. Experimental results

After six weeks of teaching practice, the learner has exhibited certain positive changes in oral expression fluency, topic development and language organization, and has gradually developed the habit of conducting oral practice with the assistance of AI tools.

4.1 Example of speech transcription

As can be observed from the student's answers to the Part 1 questions before and after the intervention (see Table 1), after six weeks of instruction and practice, the student's fluency and coherence improved significantly: the frequent short pauses observed initially were eliminated completely, and only occasional minor pauses occurred at the post-test stage. The student is also able to employ a number of cohesive devices to facilitate expression.

Table 1

Yeah, because I think somebody is just like (..) stylish architecture, or some natural sceneries are the arts themselves. And a it has a (.)they have some(.) values to (.)picture it because (.)it can be a really(..)valuable memories for us.	*Definitely if I'm not mistaken, a rule that it was about 2 years ago, I traveled to Hangzhou city in Zhejiang province. And the West Lake is really fantastic. It has more than ten different views. One of them is the Lei Feng tower and this kind of radiation temple. I went there. I found that(.) the the temple was decorated with gold. Actually,(.) it's very shiny, especially under the sunshine. I took picture with it and I still can see the picture. And the view is still kind of impressive to me*

To further investigate the variation in learners' oral performance, this paper conducts descriptive statistics of simple linguistic features on the transcribed texts from the pre-test and post-test. Given the limited sample size of this case study, no statistical inference is carried out. Instead, descriptive analysis is adopted to present the changing trend.

Table 2 Changes in oral performance between pre-test and post-test

Indicator	Pre-test	Post-test
Average sentence length (word s)	19	11.5
Number of cohesive device uses	2	5
Number of complex sentence uses	2	5
Number of self-corrections	3	1
Total word count	38	92
Number of sentences	2	8

The results show that learners have demonstrated certain improvements in language organization, sentence structure usage, and fluency. Specifically, increased use of complex sentences and cohesive devices, along with reduced pauses and frequent self-corrections, indicate enhanced organizational skills and greater confidence in oral expression.

4.2 Comparison of IELTS Scores

The student's speaking skills have improved. Through discussions with the student, their approach to learning speaking has shifted—from rote memorization of answers to leveraging AI tools and classroom instruction, resulting in better speaking performance. Notably, the learner's IELTS listening score also increased from 6.5 to 8. In interviews, the learner reported that practicing English conversations with AI helped them gradually adapt to real-life speech rates and accumulate more natural expressions. Although this improvement may be related to AI-based practice, since this study did not separately control for listening training factors, the connection remains based on the learner's subjective perception and inference, and cannot be directly attributed to the current teaching intervention.

Table 3

Test Time	**January 2026**	**March 2026**
Total Score	**7**	**7.5**
Listening	**6.5**	**8**
Reading	**8.5**	**8**
Speaking	**5.5**	**6.5**
Writing	**7**	**6.5**

4.3 Survey and Interview Results

To understand learners' attitudes toward generative AI-assisted English learning, the study employed the "Attitude Scale for Generative AI-Assisted English Learning among Chinese University Learners"[7]to survey the participant. Since this study is a single-case investigation (N=1), the questionnaire results are not used as a basis for statistical inference but primarily serve as supplementary material to gain insight into the learner's experience and attitudes.

Overall, learners hold a positive attitude toward AI-assisted English learning. They selected "strongly agree" on items such as "liking to use generative AI to solve English learning problems," "believing that AI can improve the efficiency of English learning," and " AI can improve English proficiency."

In the interview, the learner mentioned that AI tools provide instant feedback and help with repeated speaking practice, making it easier to develop a sense of authentic expression compared to traditional rote memorization. At the same time, the learner also noted that practicing with AI reduces anxiety about speaking, encouraging more proactive participation during practice.

Table 4

Question No.	Item Content	Score
Q1	I like using generative AI to solve English learning problems.	**5**
Q2	Generative AI-assisted learning makes me feel confident.	**4**
Q3	I have positive expectations for using generative AI to assist English learning.	**5**
Q4	I am willing to proactively learn about generative AI for English learning.	**4**
Q5	I want to try personalized English learning with generative AI.	**4**
Q6	I am willing to participate in relevant training.	**4**
Q7	If there is a related club, I would like to join.	**4**
Q8	I want to explore ways to use it to make English learning more convenient.	**4**
Q9	I will take the initiative to use generative AI in my English learning.	**4**
Q10	I believe generative AI can improve English learning efficiency.	**5**
Q11	I think every student should master this method.	**4**
Q12	I believe generative AI is indispensable for English learning.	**4**
Q13	I think it is worth using it to improve my English proficiency.	**5**
Q14	I believe I can effectively use it to assist my learning.	**4**
Q15	I believe its benefits outweigh its drawbacks.	**4**

5. Conclusion

This article presents a six-week teaching case study demonstrating the practical application of AI tools in enhancing the Output-Oriented Approach to IELTS speaking instruction. The research reveals that the learner showed positive improvements in fluency, language organization, and learning attitude, gradually developing the habit of using AI for independent speaking practice.

However, due to the small sample size of only one participant and the lack of a control group design, the study's findings cannot definitively prove that AI-enhanced POA has a certain effect on improving IELTS speaking proficiency. Learners' performance changes may also be influenced by practice effects, test familiarity, and other external learning factors. Therefore, this paper is more suitable as an exploratory teaching case, providing reference for future studies with larger samples, longer durations, and better control of multiple variables.

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