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Exploring the Impact of the Production-Oriented Approach on Chinese University Students' Motivation for English Learning: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract
The importance of English language education in China has grown exponentially, especially at the higher education level. In response to the call for more interactive and student-centered instructional methods, the Production-Oriented Approach (POA) has been introduced. Despite the growing body of research on the effects of the POA on language learning outcomes, its impact on students' motivation for learning English remains under-researched. Thus, this mixed-methods study aimed to fill this gap by investigating the impact of the POA on Chinese university students' motivation for English learning. The quantitative results demonstrated significant improvements in both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation among the students instructed by the POA. The qualitative data supported these findings, revealing that the structured stages of the POA, along with its core principles, created a supportive and engaging learning environment. However, the study also highlighted challenges, such as the potential for students to feel overwhelmed by the demands of the approach. The importance of this study lies in its demonstration that the POA is a practical and effective method for enhancing motivation in English language learning, with significant implications for broader educational reforms aimed at creating more supportive learning environments.

Keywords: China, English as a foreign language, higher education, motivation for English learning, production-oriented approach

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Introduction

The importance of English language education (ELE) in China has grown exponentially, especially at the higher education level. English proficiency is increasingly seen as a critical skill for academic success, global communication, and career advancement (Li, 2020). Universities across China prioritize ELE to prepare students for the demands of the globalized economy (Hu & Mi, 2024). This emphasis on English proficiency has led to substantial investment in ELE resources, teacher training, and curriculum development to ensure that students attain high levels of language competence.

Over the past few decades, ELE in China has undergone significant reforms. Traditional pedagogies, often characterized by rote memorization and teacher-centered approaches, have been increasingly scrutinized for their ineffectiveness in fostering English proficiency, especially communicative competence (Liang et al., 2022; Wang, 2023). In response, there has been a shift towards more interactive and student-centered teaching methods. Among these reforms, pedagogies with Chinese characteristics, which integrate traditional Chinese educational philosophies with modern language teaching theories, have gained prominence (Gong, 2024; Ling & Qin, 2022). These innovative approaches aim to address the unique challenges faced by Chinese learners and align with national educational goals.

One such pedagogy that has garnered attention is the Production-Oriented Approach (POA). Developed by Wen (2018, 2020), the POA emphasizes the integration of language production and learning, advocating for a balance between input and output in language instruction. The approach is designed to enhance learners' ability to use English in real-life contexts, thereby improving their overall communicative competence (Fu, 2022; Zhang, 2021). By encouraging active language use, the POA aims to bridge the gap between language knowledge and language use, making it a promising alternative to traditional methods.

Despite the growing body of research on the effects of the POA on language learning outcomes, its impact on students' motivation for learning English remains under-researched. Theoretically, the POA is expected to be motivating because it emphasizes the practical use of language, thereby making learning more relevant and engaging for students. By focusing on the production of meaningful language output, the POA shifts the traditional classroom dynamic from passive reception to active creation, which can foster a sense of accomplishment and autonomy among learners (Fu, 2022; Sun, 2022). However, empirical evidence confirming this assumption is lacking. Previous studies (e.g., Jiang, 2023; Lu, 2018; Zhang & Huang, 2022) have mostly presented the motivating effects of the POA based on students' self-perceptions as a supplement to the principal focus on language learning outcomes, with limited systematic research specifically focusing on motivation. Moreover, existing studies (e.g., Hu, 2024; Ren & Wang, 2018; Zhang, 2020; Zhou, 2022) on motivation have primarily focused on measuring the amount of motivation (i.e., whether students' motivation improves under the instruction of the POA) rather than exploring the different types of motivation that students experience.

As such, a more nuanced understanding of how the POA influences various motivational dimensions, such as intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Liu, 2023; Ma, 2018), is essential for comprehensively evaluating its effectiveness. This study thus aims to fill this gap by investigating the impact of the POA on Chinese university students' motivation for English learning through a mixed methods approach. The primary research questions guiding this study are: (1) How does the POA influence Chinese university students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation for learning English? (2) What are the students' perceptions of the POA in terms of its motivational impact?

By addressing these questions, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of motivational dynamics in ELE and provide insights into the effectiveness of the POA in fostering sustained motivation for English learning among Chinese university students.

Literature Review

Production-Oriented Approach

The POA has gained significant attention in the field of ELE in China, emerging as an innovative framework aimed at enhancing students' practical language use. Developed by Wen (2018, 2020), the POA addresses the traditional shortcomings of English teaching in China, which often emphasize rote learning and theoretical knowledge over practical language skills. The POA is designed to bridge the gap between language learning and actual language use (Fu, 2022; Zhang, 2021), making it particularly relevant in the context of China's educational reforms.

Central to the POA are three core teaching principles: the learning-centered principle, the learning-using integration principle, and the whole-person education principle (Wen, 2018). The learning-centered principle emphasizes the importance of student engagement and active participation in the learning process. Rather than being passive recipients of knowledge, students are encouraged to take an active role in their language development (Zhang, 2020). The learning-using integration principle highlights the necessity of integrating language learning with its practical use. This principle ensures that students can apply what they have learned in real-world contexts, thereby reinforcing their language skills through practical application (Ding, 2023). The whole-person education principle goes beyond linguistic competence to include the development of students' cognitive, emotional, and social abilities, fostering a more holistic approach to language education.

The POA is also underpinned by three teaching hypotheses: the output-driven hypothesis, the input-enabling hypothesis, and the selective-learning hypothesis (Wen, 2018). The output-driven hypothesis posits that the need to produce language output drives language learning, motivating students to actively use the language. This hypothesis challenges the traditional input-first approach, suggesting that output can be an effective catalyst for learning (Liang et al., 2022). The input-enabling hypothesis supports the idea that providing students with the necessary input enables them to produce meaningful output. This input is carefully selected and sequenced to align with the students' output needs (Wen, 2020). The selective-learning hypothesis emphasizes the importance of focusing on key language points that are essential for communication, rather than overwhelming students with excessive information. This targeted approach ensures that learning is manageable and relevant to students' communicative goals .

The POA framework is implemented through three teaching stages: motivating, enabling, and assessing (Wen, 2018). In the motivating stage, teachers create a context that stimulates students' interest and need for language use. This can involve real-life scenarios, problem-solving tasks, or projects that require students to use English meaningfully (Huang & Chen, 2023). The enabling stage focuses on providing students with the necessary input and practice opportunities to develop their language skills. Teachers facilitate this stage by offering scaffolding, feedback, and opportunities for collaborative learning (W. Li, 2023). Finally, the assessing stage involves evaluating students' language use in authentic contexts. This is an important stage wherein feedback is provided to help students reflect on their performance and identify areas for improvement (Cun, 2023).

The benefits of the POA are various and have been confirmed in studies, such as enhanced student motivation (Jiang, 2023; Zhang & Huang, 2022), improved language proficiency (Ding, 2023; W. Li, 2023), increased engagement in the learning process (Fu, 2022; Sun, 2022), and deeper cultural awareness (Cun, 2023; Liao, 2024). While the POA has been primarily applied in China's ELE context, its principles and hypotheses have broader implications and can be adapted to other social contexts. In various countries, educators have started to explore the potential of the POA to enhance language learning by integrating it with local educational practices and needs (Balázs, 2020; Faisal et al., 2022; Mushtaq et al., 2021). The focus on practical language use and the holistic development of learners make the POA a versatile approach that can be tailored to different cultural and educational settings.

Among various areas of research, the motivational effect of the POA needs further investigation. While most previous research has qualitatively suggested that the POA can engage learners and quantitatively confirmed that the POA can improve motivation (Fu, 2022; Sun, 2022), there is a lack of mixed-methods research to provide a comprehensive understanding of whether the POA is motivating and, if so, why learners are motivated. Moreover, existing research has emphasized the amount of motivation learners can achieve (e.g., Jiang, 2023; Lu, 2018; Zhang & Huang, 2022), rather than examining various types of motivation, such as EM and IM, which are equally important to English learning. This specific gap prevents the POA from fully realizing its potential and leads to less emphasis on affective learning by teachers, which also underpins the design of this study.

Motivation for English Learning

Motivation for English learning refers to "the combination of effort plus desire to achieve the goal of learning the language plus favorable attitudes towards learning a new language" (Gardner, 1985, p. 10). It encompasses a wide range of psychological factors, including the desire to achieve personal goals, the need for social integration, and the pursuit of academic and professional opportunities (Okon, 2014). Motivation is a critical determinant of the effort, persistence, and overall success in language learning. It influences not only the amount of time and effort learners invest in studying but also their attitudes towards the language and their willingness to engage in learning activities (Alrabai, 2014).

Various theories have been proposed to explain motivation for learning languages, but the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) is particularly practical because it emphasizes different types of motivation, distinguishing itself from other theories that tend to emphasize the amount of motivation (Simon & West, 2022). The SDT distinguishes between intrinsic motivation (IM), extrinsic motivation (EM), and amotivation, each associated with different regulatory styles (Deci & Ryan, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2018). IM refers to engaging in an activity for its own sake, driven by interest and enjoyment. It includes three subtypes: knowledge (the desire to learn and understand), accomplishment (the drive to achieve and master tasks), and stimulation (seeking stimulating experiences). EM, on the other hand, involves performing an activity to achieve an external outcome. This can be further divided into external regulation (ER), where behavior is driven by external rewards or punishments; introjected regulation (IntroR), where behavior is guided by internal pressures such as guilt or self-esteem; and identified regulation (IdenR), where the behavior is personally valued and deemed important. Amotivation represents a lack of motivation, where individuals see no value or reason for engaging in the activity.

The SDT has been widely applied in educational contexts to understand and enhance student motivation. By recognizing the different types of motivation, educators can tailor their teaching strategies to better meet students' needs and foster a more motivating learning environment. For instance, promoting IM through engaging and enjoyable activities can help students develop a genuine interest in the subject (Abdullah et al., 2022). Conversely, understanding the role of EM can help in designing appropriate incentives and supports to maintain student engagement (Azid et al., 2023). Addressing amotivation requires identifying the underlying causes and implementing interventions that help students see the value and relevance of their learning activities (Nishida & Takagi, 2023).

Despite the theoretical insights provided by the SDT, empirical studies have indicated that Chinese university students often lack motivation for learning English (Hu & Mi, 2024; Jiao, 2023; M. Li, 2023; Yuan, 2022), despite political emphasis on improving learners' motivation (College Foreign Language Teaching Steering Committee of the Ministry of Education, 2020). Several factors contribute to this issue. Firstly, the high-pressure academic environment in China places significant emphasis on examination performance, leading to a predominance of extrinsic motivation driven by grades and future job prospects rather than intrinsic interest in the language (Wang, 2023). Secondly, traditional teaching methods, which are often lecture-based and focused on rote memorization, fail to engage students actively or make learning English a meaningful experience (Gong, 2024). Additionally, the lack of opportunities to use English in authentic communicative contexts outside the classroom further diminishes students' motivation (Ling & Qin, 2022), as they struggle to see the practical relevance of their language studies. These challenges highlight the need for pedagogical strategies that foster more autonomous and intrinsic forms of motivation, as emphasized by the SDT (Simon & West, 2022), to enhance the overall effectiveness of ELE in China.

However, there remains a lack of comprehensive studies that examine the practical application of motivational theories such as SDT in real classroom settings in China. This research gap underscores the need for empirical investigations that not only test the theoretical assumptions of motivation in language learning but also explore innovative teaching methods, such as the POA, that could potentially address these motivational deficits (Hu et al., 2023; Huang & Chen, 2023). By focusing on how the POA can enhance intrinsic motivation and create a more engaging learning environment, this study aims to contribute to the development of more effective English language teaching practices in Chinese universities, ultimately leading to improved language proficiency and greater student satisfaction.

Methodology

Research Design

A mixed-methods research approach was adopted in the study (Creswell, 2014), with an intervention design characterized by both quantitative and qualitative components to provide a comprehensive understanding of the motivational effects of the POA. In the quantitative study, an experimental group (EG) and a control group (CG) were involved, with the former undertaking the intervention of the POA and the latter receiving regular instruction for 12 weeks. Quantitative data were collected from both groups before and after the study to examine and compare the effects of different instructional methods. Qualitative data were collected both during and after the intervention from the EG to supplement and explain the quantitative findings. The practicality of

this design lay in its ability to capture both the measurable changes in motivation and the nuanced experiences of the students (Creswell, 2014).

Participants

The study was conducted at a particular university in China. Due to admission limitations at the research site (Wu & Thompson, 2021), the convenience sampling method was used to recruit two intact year-one College English classes for the study, which were randomly assigned as the EG (N = 40) and the CG (N = 40). Different from the traditional convenience sampling method, intentional control was applied to students' demographic information (refer to Table 1) to ensure comparability and reduce threats to research validity (Andrade, 2021). Moreover, the groups' latest summative English test results were compared through an independent samples *t*-test, indicating that they had similar levels of English proficiency. Considering that students' English proficiency was correlated with their motivation for language learning (Jiao, 2023), this endeavor helped to ensure that any observed differences in motivation could be attributed to the intervention rather than pre-existing differences in language ability. Furthermore, from the EG, eight students (refer to Table 2) were recruited through voluntary sampling to share their experiences and perceptions of the POA. This sample size was sufficient for qualitative saturation (Hu, 2022b). This sampling method ensured that participants were willing to share their thoughts, thereby providing richer and more reliable qualitative data (Wu & Thompson, 2021). Informed consent was obtained from all participants from the study and the ethnic committee of the research site.

Table 1. *Quantitative Participants' Demographic Information*

Group	Demographic Information
EG	Gender: Male (N = 17), Female (N = 23) Age: 19-20 Major: Business (N = 15), Finance (N = 10), Marketing (N = 8), Human Resources (N = 7) Years of English Learning: 11-13
CG	Gender: Male (N = 16), Female (N = 24) Age: 19-20 Major: Business (N = 14), Finance (N = 9), Marketing (N = 9), Human Resources (N = 9) Years of English Learning: 11-13

Table 2. *Qualitative Participants' Demographic Information*

Student	Gender	Major
Student 1 (S1)	Female	Business
Student 2 (S2)	Female	Marketing
Student 3 (S3)	Female	Finance
Student 4 (S4)	Female	Business
Student 5 (S5)	Female	Human Resources
Student 6 (S6)	Male	Business
Student 7 (S7)	Male	Human Resources
Student 8 (S8)	Male	Finance

Research Instruments

A five-point Likert questionnaire adapted from Kim (2014) and Noels et al. (2023) was used in the quantitative study to measure participants' motivation, underpinned by the SDT and including EM (ER, IntroR, and IdenR), IM (knowledge, accomplishment, and stimulation), and amotivation. A pilot study was conducted before the main study, confirming the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. For qualitative data, non-participant classroom observations were conducted during the intervention, and semi-structured interviews were held with selected students after the intervention. An observation scheme and an interview protocol were developed from relevant ones (e.g., Hu & Mi, 2024; Liu, 2023) to assist the researchers in efficiently collecting data.

Data Analysis

Subject to the research questions, quantitative data were analyzed via both between-group analysis (Mann-Whitney Test) and within-group analysis (Wilcoxon Signed Rank Tests) in Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 26.0, due to the violation of prerequisites for parametric tests (Bennett et al., 2022). Qualitative data, on the other hand, were analyzed thematically in NVivo 12.0 following the steps of familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report (Rosairo, 2023). The quantitative data provided measurable evidence of changes in motivation levels, while the qualitative data offered contextual explanations and deeper insights into how and why these changes occurred (Creswell, 2014). This mixed-methods approach not only validated the effectiveness of the POA in enhancing motivation but also highlighted specific elements of the approach that were particularly impactful, thereby offering practical recommendations for educators seeking to implement the POA in their teaching practices.

Procedure of Research

The study started in an academic semester from September 2023 to January 2024. During this period, data collection was systematically conducted across multiple stages. The initial phase involved the recruitment of participants, who were selected from a cohort of Chinese university students enrolled in English language courses. Following the recruitment, baseline assessments were administered to gauge the participants' initial levels of motivation. Subsequently, the POA teaching method was introduced in the experimental group, while the control group continued with traditional instructional methods. The intervention spanned the entire semester, with the POA method being systematically integrated into the curriculum. At the end of the semester, final assessments were conducted to measure any changes in motivation levels. In addition to quantitative data collection, qualitative methods, such as interviews, were employed to capture the students' perceptions of the learning process and the impact of the POA. This mixed-methods approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of the POA and its potential implications for broader educational practices. The data collected during this semester served as the basis for the subsequent analysis and discussion.

Findings

Quantitative Findings

Firstly, a between-group analysis was conducted to compare the motivation levels of the EG and the CG. According to Appendix A, before the study, no significant statistical differences

were found between the groups regarding EM, IM, amotivation, and general motivation for English learning, as well as the corresponding regulatory styles, including ER, IntroR, IdenR, knowledge, accomplishment, and stimulation, with p-values above .05. However, in the post-test, significant differences were found in IdenR (U = 158.00, z = -6.28, p < .001, r = .70) and EM (U = 341.00, z = -4.45, p < .001, r = .50), with the EG's means higher than the CG's. No significant differences were found in ER and IntroR (p > .05). Similarly, the EG's post-test scores were significantly higher than the CG's regarding IM (U = 377.00, z = -4.10, p < .001, r = .46) and its corresponding regulatory styles, including knowledge (U = 195.50, z = -5.93, p < .001, r = .66), accomplishment (U = 560.00, z = -2.37, p = .018, r = .27), and stimulation (U = 623.50, z = -1.75, p = .049, r = .20). Additionally, there was a significant difference in amotivation between the two groups (U = 549.50, z = -2.45, p = .014, r = .27), with the EG's score higher than the CG's. Given that the items for amotivation were reverse-scored, this statistical difference indicated that the EG had a lower level of amotivation than the CG. Overall, the EG's general motivation at the end of the study was higher than the CG's (U = 375.50, z = -4.09, p < .001, r = .46).

Further, within-group analysis was conducted to investigate the potential progress made by the EG and the CG. As shown in Appendix B, the EG made significant progress during the study in IdenR (Z = -5.34, p < .001, r = .84) and EM (Z = -4.83, p < .001, r = .76). Similarly, it improved in IM (Z = -5.47, p < .001, r = .87) and all relevant regulatory styles, including knowledge (Z = -5.23, p < .001, r = .83), accomplishment (Z = -3.90, p < .001, r = .62), and stimulation (Z = -3.80, p < .001, r = .60). Moreover, the EG also reduced its level of amotivation throughout the study (Z = -3.28, p < .001, r = .52). In general, this group significantly improved its motivation for English learning (Z = -5.48, p < .001, r = .87). In comparison, the CG improved its EM (Z = -4.83, p < .001, r = .55), including ER (Z = -3.63, p = .001, r = .57) and IntroR (Z = -3.21, p = .001, r = .51), and IM (Z = -3.48, p = .001, r = .55), especially in the regulatory style of knowledge (Z = -3.21, p = .001, r = .51). While no statistical differences were found for the other regulatory styles before and after the study, the CG significantly reduced its amotivation (Z = -3.01, p = .003, r = .48). Overall, this group improved the general motivation for English learning (Z = -4.70, p < .001, r = .74).

Generally, the quantitative findings demonstrated that the POA could significantly improve learners' motivation for English learning, especially by reducing amotivation and increasing IM characterized by acquiring knowledge and seeking accomplishment and stimulation. While the POA also improved EM, its effect was mainly on IdenR, a very self-determined style of EM. In contrast, the effect of regular instruction in the CG had a more noticeable impact on EM, particularly on the less self-determined styles such as ER and IntroR. While regular instruction also reduced amotivation and increased IM and general motivation, the effect on IM was minimal, with only the regulatory style of knowledge showing an increase. Moreover, it should be noted that in both the EG and the CG, there were students who did not show any improvement in motivation and even experienced a decrease. This necessitates a critical attitude toward the effectiveness of the instructional approaches tested in the study.

Qualitative Findings

Enhanced Engagement

During classroom observations, it was evident that students in the EG were actively engaged in learning activities. The emphasis of the POA on real-life applications and interactive tasks seemed to capture students' interest and enthusiasm. Teachers frequently used role-plays,

group discussions, and project-based learning, which encouraged students to participate actively. One observation record noted, "Students in the EG were noticeably more involved in discussions and seemed eager to share their ideas."

Interviews with students from the EG further supported these observations. Many students expressed that the practical and interactive nature of the POA made learning English more enjoyable and relevant to their lives. One student (S2) shared, "The activities we do in class feel like things I might actually need to do in real life, like having a conversation at a restaurant or giving a presentation. It makes learning feel more useful." Another student (S8) mentioned, "I look forward to English class now because it's not just about memorizing vocabulary or grammar rules. We get to do fun projects and work together, which makes it more interesting." This reflects the quantitative finding that the POA significantly increased IM, as students were driven by the desire to acquire knowledge and achieve personal goals through engaging and meaningful activities.

Improved Intrinsic Motivation

During classroom observations, students in the EG displayed a genuine interest in understanding the intricacies of the English language. They actively participated in discussions, asked questions, and demonstrated curiosity about new vocabulary and grammatical structures. One observer noted, "Students seemed genuinely interested in the learning material, often asking insightful questions and showing enthusiasm for deeper understanding."

Interviews with students further highlighted this increased desire for knowledge acquisition. One student (S5) explained, "Before, I just wanted to pass my exams, but now I find myself wanting to really understand how English works. It's fascinating to see how different it is from my native language." This shift from EM to IM was a common theme among the students interviewed. Another student (S3) said, "I enjoy learning new words and phrases because it feels like I'm unlocking a new way to communicate. It's exciting and makes me want to keep learning."

The focus of the POA on meaningful, real-life tasks also fostered a strong sense of accomplishment among students. They expressed pride in completing challenging activities and projects, which contributed to their IM. One student (S1) shared, "When I finish a project or give a presentation in English, it feels very rewarding. It's not just about getting a grade, but about achieving something I didn't think I could do." This sense of achievement was echoed by another student (S4) who said, "Accomplishing tasks in English makes me feel more capable and confident. It motivates me to take on more challenges."

Seeking stimulation in learning was another key aspect of improved IM observed in the EG. The varied and interactive activities underpinned by the POA kept students engaged and eager to participate. A researcher observed, "Students are more engaged because the activities are diverse and stimulating. They're not just sitting and listening; they're doing and interacting." This active involvement was highlighted by a student (S9) who mentioned, "I look forward to English class because it's always something new and interesting. We do different activities that keep me on my toes and make learning fun."

Modest Effect on Extrinsic Motivation

Classroom observations indicated that although students were engaged in the interactive tasks designed under the POA, their participation was often driven by a desire to meet external expectations rather than an internal interest in the content. One observer noted, "Students seemed motivated to complete tasks primarily because they wanted to avoid negative feedback or achieve high scores, rather than out of a genuine interest in the activity."

Interviews with students reinforced this observation. Many students mentioned that while they enjoyed the activities and felt they were learning, their primary motivation remained extrinsic. One student (S3) remarked, "I like the way we learn with the POA, but honestly, I still think about how this will help me pass my exams. That's the most important thing for me." This sentiment was echoed by another student (S8) who said, "My parents expect me to do well in English because it's important for my future. I feel a lot of pressure to perform well."

The influence of external pressures was a recurring theme in the interviews. Students frequently mentioned the expectations placed on them by their parents, teachers, and peers. "I study hard because my parents expect me to get good grades," one student (S7) explained. "If I don't do well, they will be disappointed." Another student (S4) highlighted the competitive environment among peers: "Everyone in my class is trying to get the highest marks. It makes me push myself harder, but it's stressful."

Some students did acknowledge that the POA helped them see the practical benefits of learning English, which in turn influenced their EM positively. "Working on projects that mimic real-life situations makes me realize that learning English is not just for exams but for my future career as well," a student noted (S1). However, this type of recognition often coexisted with the underlying pressure to meet external expectations. Observers also found that while the POA provided a more engaging way to learn, it did not entirely shift students' motivation from extrinsic to intrinsic. "The POA helps students see the relevance of English in real life, but many still view their efforts through the lens of exam performance and parental expectations," an observer commented.

Practicability of the Production-Oriented Approach

The qualitative findings highlighted the practicability of the POA in enhancing students' motivation for English learning. Through classroom observations and interviews, it became evident that the structured stages and underlying principles of the POA effectively contributed to a more engaging and motivating learning environment. For example, classroom observations revealed that the motivating stage of the POA, which involved creating real-life scenarios and problem-solving tasks, captured students' interest and encouraged active participation. One observer noted, "Students were eager to participate in activities that mirrored real-world situations, such as role-plays and discussions on current events. These tasks seemed to make learning more relevant and interesting to them."

During the enabling stage, teachers provided the necessary support and resources to help students succeed in their tasks. This included scaffolding techniques, collaborative group work, and continuous feedback, which were observed to boost students' confidence and willingness to engage. An observer mentioned, "By breaking down complex tasks and providing step-by-step guidance, students felt more capable of handling the assignments. This support was crucial in maintaining their motivation and interest."

Interviews with students reinforced these observations. Many students expressed that the POA made learning more interactive and enjoyable, which motivated them to put in more effort. One student (S5) shared, "I like that we get to do projects and work in groups. It's different from just listening to lectures, and it makes me want to participate more." Another student (S3) noted, "The feedback we receive helps us understand what we did well and where we can improve. It's encouraging and makes me want to keep trying."

The assessing stage of the POA, which focused on evaluating students' performance in meaningful contexts, was also positively received. Students appreciated the practical assessments that reflected their actual language use and progress. "I feel like the assessments are more fair and relevant. They test what we've actually learned and can use, not just what we can memorize," commented a student (S8). This approach to assessment reinforced the learning-centered principle of the POA, emphasizing the practical application of language skills and making the evaluation process more motivating for students.

Observers also highlighted the whole-person education principle embedded in the POA, which aimed to develop not just linguistic competence but also critical thinking, emotional intelligence, and social skills. "The POA encourages students to think critically and work collaboratively, which are important skills beyond language learning," an observer mentioned. This holistic approach was noted to contribute to a more well-rounded and intrinsically motivated student.

Mixed Results and Critical Perspectives

While many students found the POA engaging and beneficial for their motivation, there were instances where some students felt overwhelmed and disengaged due to the demands of the approach. Classroom observations and interviews indicated that, although the POA generally fostered an active and interactive learning environment, the constant requirement for participation and the high expectations set by the approach could be challenging for some students. One observer noted, "While most students were actively participating, there were a few who seemed visibly stressed and less engaged during intensive activities." This observation was echoed in student interviews, where several participants expressed feeling pressured by the continuous need to perform well.

One student (S2) shared, "The POA activities are interesting, but sometimes it feels like there's too much going on. I get stressed trying to keep up with everything." This sentiment highlights the potential for the POA to create a high-pressure environment that might not be suitable for all learners. Another student (S8) mentioned, "I enjoy the projects and group work, but it can be overwhelming when there are too many tasks to handle at once. Sometimes, it feels like there's no time to relax and just absorb what we're learning."

Researchers also observed that the intensity of the POA could lead to student fatigue and disengagement over time. "Some students thrive with the active participation and interactive tasks, but others start to feel burnt out. It's important to find a balance and provide breaks or less intensive activities to keep everyone motivated," an observer commented. This feedback underscored the need for a flexible implementation of the POA that considered the varying endurance and engagement levels of students.

Moreover, the feedback from both students and observers suggested that the demanding nature of the POA could sometimes detract from its intended benefits. A student (S6) remarked, "I like learning English, but the pressure to always perform well in every task can make it less enjoyable. Sometimes, I just want to learn without the stress of constant assessment." This indicated that while the POA aimed to create a motivating and practical learning experience, its rigorous structure could sometimes have the opposite effect, leading to anxiety and disengagement.

Discussion

The findings from this study offer valuable insights into the effectiveness of the POA in enhancing motivation among Chinese university students learning English. The quantitative results demonstrated that the POA significantly improved both IM and EM among students. IM, characterized by a desire to acquire knowledge, achieve learning tasks, and seek stimulation in learning, showed notable improvements. This aligns with the emphasis of the POA on practical and meaningful language use, which engages students in real-life tasks and fosters a deeper interest in the language (Ding, 2023; Sun, 2022; Zhang, 2020). The qualitative data supported these findings, indicating that the structured stages of motivating, enabling, and assessing, along with the principles of learning-centeredness, learning-using integration, and whole-person education, created a supportive and engaging learning environment (Wen, 2018, 2020).

The significant increase in IM observed in the EG can be attributed to the focus of the POA on practical application and interactive tasks, which encourage students to take an active role in their language development (Cun, 2023). This finding is consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of IM in achieving sustainable and meaningful learning outcomes (Yang & Wu, 2024). The emphasis of the POA on tasks that mimic real-life situations likely contributed to students' increased interest and enjoyment in learning English, as indicated in Fu's (2022) and Zhang's (2020) research. For example, activities such as role-plays, project-based learning, and real-world problem-solving tasks provided students with opportunities to apply their language skills in contexts that felt relevant and engaging, thereby enhancing their IM.

While the POA improved EM, the effect was more pronounced in self-determined styles of EM, particularly IdenR. This, in line with Wang's (2023) research, suggests that while the POA can help students recognize the personal value of learning English, traditional external pressures, such as examinations and parental expectations, continue to play a significant role. The persistence of these external motivators highlights the challenge of shifting students' motivation from extrinsic to intrinsic, especially in high-pressure academic environments such as China's (Feng, 2023; Hu & Mi, 2024). The qualitative data revealed that although students appreciated the relevance and applicability of the POA tasks, their motivation was still significantly influenced by the need to perform well in examinations and meet parental expectations. This underscores the complex interplay between different types of motivation and the enduring influence of external factors in academic settings (Feng, 2023; Simon & West, 2022).

The qualitative findings also underscored the practicability of the POA in creating an engaging and motivating learning environment. The structured stages of motivating, enabling, and assessing, combined with continuous feedback and support, were crucial in maintaining students' interest and confidence (Balázs, 2020; Cun, 2023; Hu & Wang, 2024; Sun, 2022). The motivating stage involved creating scenarios and tasks that sparked students' curiosity and interest, setting the stage for meaningful engagement. The enabling stage provided the necessary scaffolding and resources to help students succeed in these tasks, while the assessing stage offered practical evaluations that reinforced the real-world application of their skills.

However, the findings also revealed mixed results and critical perspectives. Some students felt overwhelmed by the constant demands for active participation and high performance, which sometimes led to stress and disengagement. This, as also indicated by Cun's (2023) research, suggests that while the POA is effective, its implementation needs to be balanced to prevent student burnout and ensure all students benefit from the approach. Researchers also observed that while the POA encouraged greater engagement and participation, it also required significant preparation

and adaptability to cater to diverse student needs (Fu, 2022; Hu, 2022a). Ensuring that the tasks are challenging yet manageable is essential to maintain motivation without causing excessive stress.

The research findings have significant implications for English language education in China. Firstly, they validate the POA as an effective approach to enhance motivation by making learning more relevant and engaging. However, educators should be mindful of the challenges associated with its intensive nature and aim to balance rigorous tasks with less demanding activities. Secondly, the persistence of EM driven by external pressures highlights the need for broader educational reforms to reduce the high-stakes nature of examinations and create a more supportive learning environment that values IM. This may involve shifting the focus from purely examination-oriented outcomes to a more holistic view of language learning that emphasizes personal growth and practical language use.

Conclusion

The findings from this study provide compelling evidence that the POA is effective in enhancing motivation among Chinese university students learning English. The quantitative data demonstrated significant improvements in both IM and EM, particularly in self-determined regulatory styles. The focus of the POA on practical and meaningful language use, coupled with its structured stages of motivating, enabling, and assessing, created a supportive and engaging learning environment that fostered a deeper interest in the language and increased student engagement. The qualitative data supported these quantitative findings, revealing that students appreciated the interactive and practical nature of the POA tasks. However, it also highlighted some challenges, such as the potential for students to feel overwhelmed by the constant demands for active participation and high performance. These insights suggest that while the POA is highly effective, its implementation must be balanced to prevent student burnout and ensure that all students can benefit from the approach.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of motivational dynamics in ELE and provides practical recommendations for educators. However, certain limitations of the study must be acknowledged. Firstly, the sample size was relatively small and limited to a single university, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples to validate and extend these results. Additionally, the study was conducted in a specific cultural and educational context, which may limit the applicability of the findings to other settings. Educational practices and student attitudes towards learning English can vary significantly across different regions and cultures. Therefore, it would be beneficial for future research to examine the effectiveness of the POA in diverse cultural contexts to understand its broader applicability and potential adaptations needed for different educational environments. Furthermore, while the study focused on the immediate impact of the POA on motivation, it did not explore the long-term sustainability of these motivational gains. Future research could employ longitudinal designs to assess how the POA influences students' motivation over extended periods. This would provide a deeper understanding of the lasting effects of the approach and its potential to foster enduring motivation.\

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Appendices

Appendix A: Between-Group Analysis of Motivation Levels

	Construct	Group	M	SD	Mean Rank	Mann-Whitney U	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
Pre-test	ER	EG	3.349	.449	39.45	758.500	−.421	.674
		CG	3.323	.435	41.55			
	IntroR	EG	3.501	.499	40.53	799.000	−.010	.992
		CG	3.472	.393	40.48			
	IdenR	EG	3.167	.672	38.43	717.000	−.815	.415
		CG	3.159	.643	42.58			
	EM	EG	3.317	.348	39.31	752.500	−.460	.646
		CG	3.324	.255	41.69			
	Knowledge	EG	2.317	.358	41.83	747.000	−.556	.578
		CG	2.291	.381	39.18			
	Accomplishment	EG	2.391	.359	37.21	668.500	−1.391	.164
		CG	2.421	.332	43.79			
	Stimulation	EG	2.392	.335	40.28	791.000	−.095	.925
		CG	2.401	.332	40.73			
	IM	EG	2.370	.231	39.79	771.500	−.280	.779
		CG	2.381	.236	41.21			
	Amotivation	EG	2.428	.271	40.48	799.000	−.100	.992
		CG	2.389	.392	40.53			
	General Motivation	EG	2.695	.204	39.75	770.000	−.289	.772
		CG	2.694	.240	41.25			
Post-test	ER	EG	3.533	.475	35.73	609.000	−1.894	.058
		CG	3.650	.457	45.28			
	IntroR	EG	3.813	.464	44.09	656.500	−1.421	.155
		CG	3.707	.512	36.91			
	IdenR	EG	3.920	.541	56.55	158.000	−6.279	.000
		CG	3.323	.530	24.45			
	EM	EG	3.781	.225	51.98	341.000	−4.450	.000

		CG	3.490	.267	29.03			
	Knowledge	EG	3.361	.457	55,61	195.500	−5.927	.000
		CG	2.534	.477	25.39			
	Accomplishment	EG	3.218	1.129	46.50	560.000	−2.372	.018
		CG	2.651	.356	34.50			
	Stimulation	EG	2.976	.913	44.91	623.500	−1.754	.049
		CG	2.511	.376	36.09			
	IM	EG	3.181	.668	51.08	377.000	−4.095	.000
		CG	2.554	.232	29.93			
	Amotivation	EG	2.923	.934	46.76	549.500	−2.447	.014
		CG	2.451	.412	34.24			
	General Motivation	EG	3.281	.462	51.11	375.500	−4.090	.000
		CG	2.838	.222	29.89			

Appendix B: Within-Group Analysis of Motivation Levels

Construct/Variable	Group	N	Mean Rank	Sum of Ranks	Z	Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)
ER	EG	8[a]	14.21	128.50	−1.945	.061
		21[b]	15.33	306.50		
		11[c]				
	CG	5[a]	6.75	27.00	−3.632	.001
		20[b]	14.19	298.00		
		15[c]				
IntroR	EG	6[a]	8.92	53.50	−3.214	.132
		24[b]	15.45	324.50		
		10[c]				
	CG	6[a]	15.50	93.00	−3.055	.002
		26[b]	16.12	403.00		
		8[c]				
IdenR	EG	1[a]	10.12	200.00	−5.340	.000

		37[b]	19.50	741.00		
		2[c]				
	CG	16[a]	13.40	201.00	−1.471	.114
		9[b]	11.00	99.00		
		15[c]				
EM	EG	3[a]	7.67	23.00	−4.827	.000
		34[b]	19.48	643.00		
		3[c]				
	CG	8[a]	10.44	83.50	−3.452	.000
		25[b]	19.10	477.50		
		7[c]				
Knowledge	EG	1[a]	8.13	42.00	−5.234	.000
		39[b]	20.50	820.00		
	CG	5[a]	9.60	48.00	−3.210	.001
		20[b]	14.43	303.00		
		15[c]				
Accomplishment	EG	6[a]	12.86	90.00	−3.898	.000
		31[b]	20.43	613.00		
		3[c]				
	CG	9[a]	13.00	117.00	−1.615	.129
		18[b]	13.76	234.00		
		13[c]				
Stimulation	EG	7[a]	10.00	70.00	−3.798	.000
		26[b]	18.88	491.00		
		7[c]				
	CG	7[a]	14.79	103.50	−1.631	.089
		19[b]	12.31	221.50		
		14[c]				

IM	EG	1[a]	8.13	42.00	−5.472	.000
		37[b]	21.26	574.00		
		2[c]				
	CG	7[a]	11.50	69.00	−3.484	.001
		23[b]	16.50	396.00		
		10[c]				
Amotivation	EG	11[a]	12.90	129.00	−3.281	.000
		26[b]	21.26	574.00		
		3[c]				
	CG	11[a]	14.60	146.00	−3.015	.003
		25[b]	20.00	520.00		
		4[c]				
General Motivation	EG	3[a]	4.74	9.50	−5.479	.000
		37[b]	21.42	810.50		
	CG	7[a]	10.65	64.59	−4.701	.000
		33[b]	22.31	755.50		

a. Post-test < Pre-test
b. Post-test > Pre-test
c. Post-test = Pre-test