

From Language Output to Learner Growth: Investigating POA-Based Instructional Effects in Chinese Vocational EFL Contexts

Wang Qiuyun, Wardatul Akmam Din*

University Malaysia Sabah

*Corresponding Author

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ABSTRACT

This study employed a mixed-methods research design to investigate the instructional effectiveness of a seven-week Production-Oriented Approach (POA) writing module implemented at a vocational college in China. The module was specifically developed to address the writing needs and challenges of non-English major students in authentic vocational contexts. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-test writing assessments, while qualitative data sources included students' reflective journals, assignments, classroom observations, and semi-structured interviews. Findings from the quantitative analysis revealed statistically significant improvements in overall writing performance ($t = 8.92$, $p < .001$, $d = 1.33$), particularly in task completion, language accuracy, and coherence, with the most notable gains observed in higher-level tasks aligned with workplace demands. Qualitative data further confirmed positive developments in writing confidence, learner engagement, and audience awareness. Additionally, the POA module fostered broader learning benefits, as students demonstrated greater autonomy in planning, revising, and self-editing, along with emerging critical thinking skills in constructing and evaluating arguments. Triangulated data from teacher observations and student interviews supported these trends, highlighting enhanced classroom participation, self-regulation, and reflective learning behaviors. Overall, the study provides strong empirical support for the effectiveness of the POA module in enhancing both writing competence and transferable learning skills. By integrating task-based, context-driven instruction, the module helped bridge the gap between classroom writing and real-world communication needs, offering valuable insights for pedagogical innovation in vocational EFL settings.

Keywords: Production-Oriented Approach (POA), English writing, vocational colleges, learner autonomy, critical thinking

INTRODUCTION

In Chinese vocational college EFL writing classrooms, instruction often centers on form-focused drills and exam preparation. This results in limited writing proficiency and a significant gap between classroom learning and actual workplace needs (Qingfen, 2023). When faced with authentic writing tasks, students typically lack confidence, autonomy, and critical thinking (Yang, 2024). This issue is particularly pronounced in vocational contexts, where students' learning goals and cognitive profiles differ markedly from those of their peers in comprehensive universities (Jiang, 2022). Vocational students prioritize practicality and vocational relevance; tasks aligned with real-world scenarios are essential to motivating and engaging them (Ruijuan et al., 2023).

With the advancement of the Belt and Road Initiative, vocational English education in China is playing a growing

role in international communication and workplace preparation (Office of the Leading Group for Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, n.d.). Recent research also highlights the potential of POA to enhance intercultural communication competence, a key skill for vocational graduates in the globalized workplace (Yang & Lin, 2024). However, current writing instruction remains largely exam-oriented, lacking systematic designs that integrate authentic vocational contexts and foster higher-order thinking (Khan et al., 2025). Although POA has been shown to enhance linguistic accuracy and organizational coherence (Asmawi & Sun, 2023; Lei & Mokhtar, 2023), and to promote student motivation and classroom engagement (Wen, 2024a), several key gaps remain. First, most studies focus on university students and overlook the distinct learning needs and profiles of vocational college learners (Liu, 2020). Second, existing research tends to examine language output only, with limited attention to how POA may promote broader learner capacities such as autonomy, confidence, and critical thinking (Challob, 2021; Yin et al., 2023). Third, few studies adopt mixed-methods approaches that triangulate learning outcomes and process-based indicators, limiting the depth and reliability of pedagogical insights (Yi, 2022).

To explore learner development across multiple dimensions, this study draws on an integrated theoretical framework. The instructional design is based on POA, and is further informed by Vygotsky (1978) Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes scaffolding and social mediation in the Zone of Proximal Development, and Bandura (1982) Social Cognitive Theory, which highlights the role of self-efficacy in learner motivation and affective growth. This multi-theoretical perspective enables a holistic understanding of not only what changes occur in students' performance, but also how and why these changes are fostered through instructional design.

Building on the above theoretical perspectives and contextual background, this study aims to address a critical gap in vocational education research by empirically investigating the multidimensional impact of a POA-based module on student development. The investigation is guided by two research questions (RQs) and their corresponding hypotheses (Hs):

Research Questions (RQs)

1. To what extent can the POA module improve students' English writing performance (compared to traditional instruction)?
2. RQ2: Does the module foster students' learner autonomy, confidence, and critical thinking?

Research Hypotheses (Hs)

1. H1: The POA module significantly improves students' overall writing ability.
2. H2: The module significantly enhances writing performance across language expression, content depth, and discourse organization.
3. H3: The module promotes learner autonomy, confidence, and critical thinking beyond writing skills.

METHODS

This study employed a mixed-methods design, systematically evaluating a seven-week POA writing module's effectiveness for first-year non-English majors in a Chinese vocational college. Data sources included pre/post-test assessments, student interviews, reflective journals, assignment records, and classroom observations, enabling multidimensional triangulation. A pilot study validated all instruments, ensuring reliability within vocational contexts. Data analysis combined descriptive statistics, t-tests, effect sizes (interpreted per Cohen's conventions: small=0.2, medium=0.5, large=0.8), and thematic analysis.

Design

This study focused on the implementation and evaluation of a POA-based writing module. The module followed the ‘motivating–enabling–assessing’ three-stage cycle of the POA framework (Wen, 2024b), incorporating authentic workplace scenarios and using task chains to guide students through multiple output practices that foster real-world communication and classroom interaction. The research procedures and instruments were piloted on a small scale to ensure the feasibility of the study and the reliability of the collected data.

Participants

The study involved 60 first-year non-English majors from a vocational college, randomly assigned to experimental (n=30) or control (n=30) groups. Pre-tests confirmed baseline equivalence. Post-intervention, six students from the experimental group were selected (marked, moderate, and limited improvement) for interviews and reflective journal analysis. All participation was voluntary, ethical standards were strictly observed, and confidentiality ensured.

Data Collection

To comprehensively present the effects of the module intervention, this study collected the following multiple data sources:

i. Pre- and post-test writing tasks

Both the experimental and control groups completed a standardized argumentative writing task on a vocational topic (e.g., ‘The Pros and Cons of Working from Home’) before and after the intervention. The writing was scored based on a modified IELTS writing rubric, retaining four core dimensions—task completion, coherence and cohesion, vocabulary use, and grammatical accuracy—while adding two new dimensions: vocational relevance and critical thinking. The total score was 100 points, ensuring comprehensive evaluation aligned with vocational contexts (see Appendix A for details). To ensure the reliability of this scoring instrument, the adapted rubric underwent a pilot inter-rater consistency check during the trial phase and achieved a high level of agreement (Cohen’s Kappa = 0.85), indicating strong scoring reliability.

ii. Reflective journals and assignment submission data

During the intervention, experimental group students wrote weekly reflective journals to document their planning, revision, and problem-solving strategies in writing. Researchers extracted key terms from these journals and combined them with assignment submission and on-time completion rates from four tasks to dynamically analyze students’ engagement and self-regulation tendencies.

iii. Teacher observations and scoring feedback

Throughout the intervention, the teacher used an observation checklist to record learning performance in class activities, including teacher-student interactions, group discussions, and peer feedback sessions. The teacher also provided qualitative feedback on students’ proactiveness and class participation through the writing scoring forms.

iv. Post-intervention interviews

At the end of the intervention, six students from the experimental group (representing high, moderate, and low progress) participated in semi-structured interviews. The interviews explored topics such as writing confidence, autonomous learning strategies, task adaptability, and overall experiences with the POA module. This aimed to

uncover students' subjective perceptions and skill development processes, supplementing the test data by capturing individualized changes and affective factors (see Appendix B for interview outline).

Module Implementation

During the seven-week intervention period, the experimental group received instruction through the POA-based writing module, with two classes per week, each lasting 60 minutes. The module was structured around a task-chain sequence, incorporating authentic vocational contexts to stimulate learning motivation, provide targeted input support, and strengthen feedback mechanisms, with the aim of promoting multidimensional development in students' writing skills and additional learning abilities.

In the motivating stage, the teacher introduced authentic workplace writing scenarios that aligned with vocational backgrounds, helping students identify clear writing goals and engaging them in group discussions and brainstorming activities to spark their motivation. For instance, writing tasks included topics such as 'Job Application Letters' and 'Customer Communication Emails,' directly linked to real-world work contexts, enabling students to quickly develop a sense of relevance and practical application. In class, the teacher used scenario-based questions (e.g., 'How can a job application letter stand out among many?') to guide role-playing and discussions, reinforcing the real-world significance of the tasks.

In the enabling stage, the teacher provided input materials tailored to the writing tasks (such as examples, sentence templates, and vocabulary collections). Students were supported through micro-writing exercises, peer reviews, and teacher guidance to enrich their writing content and enhance both linguistic expression and textual coherence. The teacher also incorporated real-time feedback and group sharing activities, encouraging students to engage in multiple rounds of brainstorming and writing planning before completing their final drafts. This helped them move beyond simply replicating model texts and gradually develop personalized writing styles and ideas. The group peer review sessions prompted students to adopt a reader's perspective when evaluating work, further cultivating critical awareness in writing.

In the assessing stage, students engaged in self-evaluation and peer feedback, focusing on key dimensions such as language expression, task completion, and vocational relevance. The teacher conducted quantitative scoring using the adapted rubric and provided multidimensional feedback on areas including linguistic accuracy, logical structure, and task alignment. The emphasis was placed on creating a 'self-peer-teacher' feedback loop throughout repeated revisions and diverse writing tasks, enabling students to continuously reflect on and refine their writing. In contrast, the control group received traditional writing instruction, which reflects the standard approach commonly adopted at the institution. This method emphasized textbook-based grammar instruction and form-focused drills, with writing tasks primarily serving as tools for assessing grammatical accuracy. Teachers provided error corrections on final drafts, but the instructional process did not incorporate authentic tasks, peer feedback, iterative drafting, or contextualized learning activities.

Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using paired-sample t-tests to examine significant changes in writing performance within the experimental group before and after the intervention. To compare the effectiveness between groups, independent-sample t-tests were conducted, supplemented by effect size calculations (Cohen's *d*) to assess practical significance, ensuring that the findings were both statistically and pedagogically meaningful.

Qualitative data were analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis framework proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006) to enhance methodological rigor and transparency. Researchers first conducted repeated readings of reflective journals, teacher observation notes, and interview transcripts to establish familiarity. Initial coding was then applied to identify recurrent keywords, typical phrases, and affective expressions. These codes were

compared and clustered into preliminary themes, which were subsequently reviewed, defined, and named through collaborative discussion. The development of themes was guided by the research questions and theoretical framework to ensure theoretical relevance. To guarantee coding reliability, cross-checking and peer refinement were conducted among researchers. The final thematic framework encompassed three key learner development dimensions: autonomous learning, writing confidence, and critical thinking. Additionally, data triangulation was emphasized by comparing insights across journals, observations, and interview responses to identify dynamic patterns and underlying mechanisms in student development. This multi-source, cross-validated analysis strengthened the scientific credibility and generalizability of the study's findings.

RESULTS

This section systematically presents the multidimensional effects of the seven-week POA writing module intervention, directly addressing Research Questions 1 and 2. Through triangulation in the mixed-methods design, a comprehensive analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data was conducted to highlight improvements in students' writing performance, as well as additional learning gains in learner autonomy, writing confidence, and critical thinking. The analysis covers overall writing scores, changes across six core writing dimensions, dynamic trends in reflective journals and assignment submission behavior, and feedback from teacher observations and student interviews, constructing a multilayered and holistic picture of the intervention's impact.

Findings for RQ1: Writing Performance

To test Hypothesis H1—that the POA module would significantly enhance students' overall writing performance—this study first compared the changes in pre- and post-test total writing scores between the experimental and control groups. The results showed that the experimental group's mean writing score improved significantly from 65.3 (SD=7.8) in the pre-test to 75.1 (SD=6.9) in the post-test, reflecting a mean gain of 9.8 points ($t=8.92$, $p<.001$). The effect size, Cohen's $d=1.33$, indicated a large practical impact, suggesting the intervention led to statistically and practically significant improvement. In contrast, the control group showed only a minor, non-significant increase of 1.3 points (from 66.1 to 67.4, $p=.232$), further supporting the positive effect of the POA module (see Table 3.1).

Table 1. Pre- and Post-Test Comparison of Writing Scores (Experimental vs Control Group)

Group	Test time	Mean \pm SD	t-value	p-value	Effect Size (d)
Experimental (n=30)	Pre-test	65.3 \pm 7.8			
	Post-test	75.1 \pm 6.9	8.92	< .001	1.33 (Large)
Control (n=30)	Pre-test	66.1 \pm 7.3			
	Post-test	67.4 \pm 7.2	1.21	.232	0.18 (Small)

To further test Hypothesis H2—that the POA module would significantly improve multiple writing dimensions, including language expression, content depth, and discourse organization—this study analyzed the pre- and post-test mean scores of the experimental group across six scoring dimensions (see Table 3.2). The results showed varying degrees of improvement in all six dimensions. Task completion and coherence/cohesion exhibited the most significant gains, both increasing by approximately 18%. Vocabulary use and grammatical accuracy

improved by about 14%, while vocational relevance and critical thinking also demonstrated steady growth.

Table 2. Comparison of Pre- and Post-Test Scores across Writing Dimensions (Experimental Group)

Writing Dimension	Pre-test Mean	Post-test Mean	Improvement	Percentage Increase
Task Completion	12.8	15.2	+2.4	+18.8%
Coherence and Cohesion	11.5	13.6	+2.1	+18.3%
Lexical Resource	10.9	12.5	+1.6	+14.7%
Grammatical Accuracy	11.7	13.4	+1.7	+14.5%
Vocational Relevance	8.3	9.0	+0.7	+8.4%
Critical Thinking	10.1	11.4	+1.3	+12.9%

Figure 3.1, a radar chart, provides a more intuitive visualization of the post-intervention improvement trends across the six dimensions, clearly highlighting the systematic enhancement of multidimensional writing abilities achieved through the POA module.

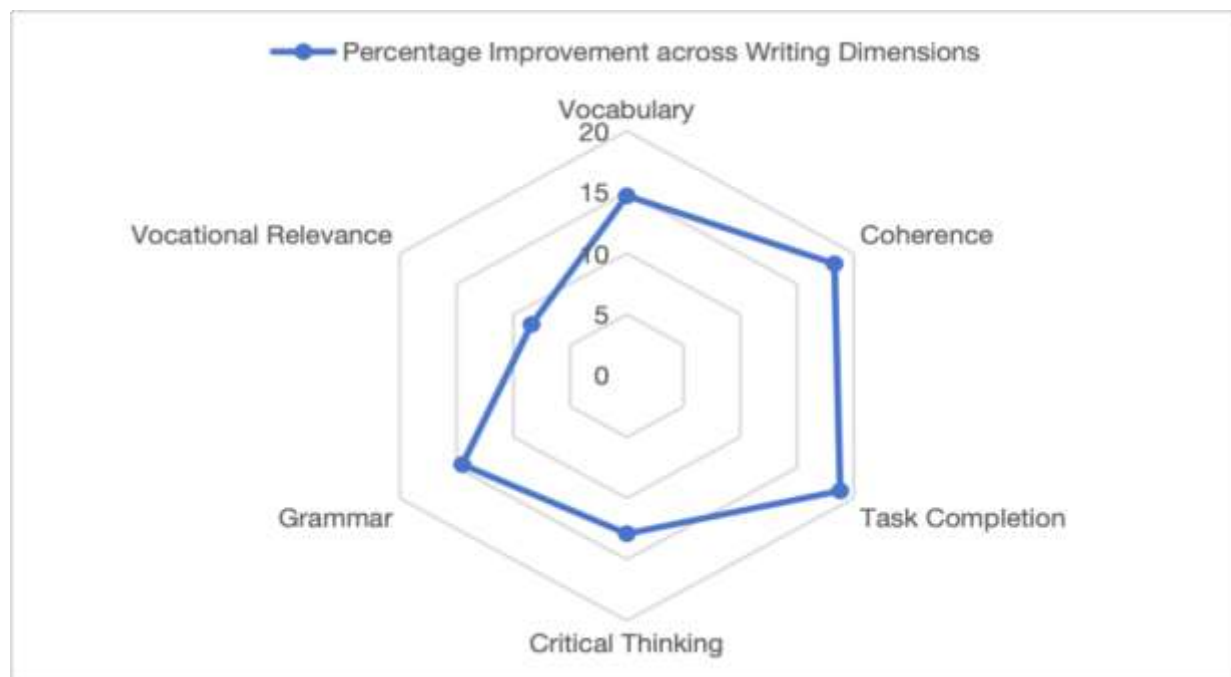


Fig. 1. Radar Chart Data: Percentage Improvement across Writing Dimensions

A closer examination revealed that the mean score for task completion increased from 12.8 to 15.2, indicating that students became more capable of fully addressing the task requirements. The mean score for coherence/cohesion rose from 11.5 to 13.6, reflecting significant progress in paragraph organization and logical

connections. Vocabulary use and grammatical accuracy also showed notable improvements, suggesting the effectiveness of the input support and feedback mechanisms in the Enabling stage. Although the gain in the vocational relevance dimension was relatively small (+0.7 points), it still demonstrated a positive trend, aligning with the vocational writing demands in authentic workplace contexts. The critical thinking dimension improved from 10.1 to 11.4, highlighting students' initial breakthroughs in diversifying their ideas and expanding their arguments.

Teacher observations and student interviews further corroborated these multidimensional improvements. For instance, teacher noted in observation records, "Students in the later writing tasks clearly paid more attention to paragraph structure and logical flow." One student also mentioned in an interview, "I started trying to break my writing into sections and looked back to see if there were any sentences that didn't connect well." These reflections complemented the quantitative data, illustrating the comprehensive, multidimensional enhancement achieved by the POA module in vocational college EFL writing instruction.

Overall, the POA writing module not only significantly improved students' overall writing ability (H1), but also promoted balanced development across multiple key dimensions (H2). These findings provide strong empirical support for task-driven, modular instructional reforms in vocational college English writing education.

Findings for RQ2: Additional Learning Gains in Autonomy, Confidence, and Critical Thinking

Beyond writing ability, the POA writing module also demonstrated positive impacts on students' additional skills—learner autonomy, writing confidence, and critical thinking—systematically addressing Research Question 2 and Hypothesis H3. These findings were verified through triangulation of diverse data sources, including reflective journals, assignment submission records, classroom observations and teacher feedback, and in-depth interviews with six stratified student samples.

In terms of autonomous learning ability, evidence from multiple data sources consistently showed students' growing capacity for self-regulation in planning, revising, and responding to feedback. Quantitatively, the on-time assignment submission rate increased from 66.7% (first task) to 96.7% (fourth task), indicating improved time management and task commitment. Reflective journals further supported this, with a rising frequency of keywords such as 'plan,' 'revise,' and 'check again,' signaling greater awareness of the writing process. Teacher observations confirmed these patterns: "Some students who were usually not proactive started to adjust paragraph structures independently and initiated discussions with peers." Interviews added a personal layer: "I would first organize the structural formulas taught in class, then write an outline, and revise it myself before submitting." (S1)

In terms of writing confidence and participation, students showed significantly greater engagement, expressive willingness, and a proactive writing attitude. Quantitative data from the self-assessment scale indicated substantial gains, with average scores for 'clarity of expression,' 'accuracy of language,' and 'overall writing confidence' rising from 2.4–2.5 to 4.4–4.5. In addition, the on-time submission rate for four writing tasks increased from 66.7% to 96.7%, and the classroom task completion rate improved from 76.2% to 94.8%, reflecting sustained growth in task execution and motivation. Teacher scoring records also confirmed this trend, as students' scores for 'active participation' rose from 5–6 to 8–10 points. Teacher noted, "*More students are actively asking questions and participating in peer review, and the overall classroom atmosphere has become much more engaged.*" Interview findings further supported these patterns. One student shared, "*At first, I could only write simple sentences. But now I can write logical business emails, and I feel a sense of achievement*" (S2). Another reflected, "*The feedback from the teacher and classmates was very specific. After revising and rewriting, I gradually became more confident*" (S3). This triangulated evidence from self-assessments, classroom records, and interviews illustrates the POA module's positive impact on writing confidence and active classroom

engagement.

Regarding critical thinking awareness, students gradually demonstrated stronger logical reasoning and an emerging audience perspective in their writing. Quantitative keyword analysis revealed a marked increase in the use of causal links, concessive structures, and evaluative verbs, with the frequency rising from 18.2% in Week 1 to 64.7% by Week 7. Frequent expressions included ‘because,’ ‘however,’ and ‘more convincing,’ indicating improved logical structuring and depth of argumentation. Teacher observation logs further confirmed this progression, such as: *“In Week 7, S06 used concessive connectors like ‘although... yet...’ to express contrast in their writing.”* Interview data echoed these developments, with one student remarking, *“When I write now, I will think about whether my point of view is too one-sided. I also try to think from the reader’s perspective to see if my argument can convince others.”* (S3), reflecting a shift toward self-critique and audience awareness. However, not all students progressed at the same rate; one student admitted, *“I still can’t think from multiple perspectives. I just care if there are mistakes, not if the idea could be better”* (S4). This type of response reminds us that while most students made progress, there were still individual differences in the development of critical thinking expression. The integration of three data sources — keyword trends, teacher observations, and interview responses — provides strong support for the preliminary effectiveness of the POA module in fostering critical thinking.

Table 3.3 summarizes the typical manifestations and key evidence across these three additional skill dimensions, illustrating the multidimensional learning benefits achieved through the module implementation.

Table 3. Evidence Chain for the Development of Additional Learning Skills

Dimension of Learning Gains	Specific Indicators	Data Sources
Autonomous Learning Ability	Increased frequency of keywords like “plan,” “revise,” and “check again” in reflective journals; on-time assignment submission rate rose from 66.7% to 96.7%	Reflective journals, assignment records, teacher observations, student interviews
Writing Confidence and Participation	More active questioning and expression; self-assessment scale averages increased from 2.5 to 4.5; interview evidence of enhanced writing confidence	Teacher feedback, self-assessment scales, task completion rates, student interviews
Critical Thinking Awareness	Frequency of causal and concessive structures rose from 18.2% to 64.7%; interviews indicating growing reflection awareness	Reflective journals, teacher feedback, student interviews

These multidimensional data findings support Hypothesis H3, indicating that the POA writing module not only led to measurable improvements in writing ability but also fostered multidimensional development in learner autonomy, writing confidence, and critical thinking. The integration of authentic task-driven activities and diverse support mechanisms helped vocational college students develop more proactive learning motivation and strategic awareness in real-world contexts, enriching the multifaceted practical value of writing instruction in this setting.

DISCUSSION

The POA writing module significantly addressed traditional vocational EFL limitations, integrating real-world

scenarios, peer feedback, and iterative revision, effectively supporting H1–H3. This study addresses previously identified research gaps by empirically verifying POA’s effectiveness in fostering not just language proficiency but also learner autonomy, critical thinking, and confidence, particularly within vocational contexts.

Traditional EFL writing classes in vocational colleges typically focus on grammar drills and sentence pattern practice, lacking real-world vocational relevance and often neglecting higher-order learning goals such as expressing opinions, constructing meaning, and developing critical thinking in authentic contexts (Arifin, 2024; Shewangizaw & Hailu, 2024). By integrating a three-stage ‘motivating–enabling–assessing’ cycle and task-chain design grounded in real-world contexts, the POA module addressed these limitations. It not only motivated students to write for authentic vocational purposes but also supported the development of both language skills and broader learning abilities across multiple dimensions.

This study also sheds light on the distinct contributions of each stage of the POA module. In the Motivating stage, the integration of authentic workplace writing scenarios significantly increased students’ task engagement and motivation. During the Enabling stage, teacher explanations, peer reviews, and model input provided essential scaffolding that supported multidimensional improvements in language expression and logical structuring. The Assessing stage, through diverse feedback channels—including teacher feedback, peer revisions, and self-reflection—encouraged students to continually revise and integrate their writing ideas, gradually internalizing these practices into autonomous learning and critical thinking abilities. This systematic three-stage support helped students move from input-driven writing to output-oriented expression, fostering a shift from language imitation to independent articulation.

Specifically, the experimental group’s significant improvements in overall writing performance and in the six key dimensions supported Hypotheses H1 and H2, confirming the module’s effectiveness in enhancing the completeness, coherence, and vocational relevance of students’ writing. This aligns with findings by Yang and Lin (2024) and Li (2024) and extends their applicability to the vocational college EFL writing context, enriching the practical foundation of the POA framework. Teacher observations and student interviews further corroborated these quantitative findings. As one student shared: *‘I would first organize the structural formulas taught in class, then write an outline, and finally revise it myself before submitting.’* Such process-oriented behaviors exemplify the multidimensional development of writing abilities.

More importantly, the POA module also demonstrated positive effects beyond language output by fostering additional learning gains in learner autonomy, writing confidence, and critical thinking, thereby supporting Hypothesis H3. Triangulated evidence from reflective journals, assignment submission data, teacher feedback, and interviews confirmed students’ active engagement in self-planning, repeated revision, peer feedback, and critical thinking. For instance, the frequency of keywords such as ‘plan,’ ‘revise,’ and ‘check again’ in the reflective journals increased substantially, while interview data revealed: *‘I used to only be able to write simple sentences. Now, I can write logically clear business emails, and I feel a sense of achievement.’* These findings resonate with Hsu et al. (2024) emphasis on the positive role of self-regulation in learning strategies and with Utami and Wahyudin (2022) research on the relationship between writing confidence and willingness to express ideas. Together, they highlight how the POA module’s diversified scaffolding and authentic task-driven learning approach helped students move beyond the narrow “model imitation–test-oriented writing” pattern, gradually activating their intrinsic learning motivation and metacognitive awareness.

Theoretical and Pedagogical Significance

From a theoretical perspective, the findings of this study strongly align with the ‘self-efficacy’ pathway in Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura & Walters, 1977) and the ‘Zone of Proximal Development’ framework (Vygotsky, 1978). In the POA module, authentic, context-based tasks in the vocational college setting created an optimal

challenge zone, while teacher support and peer collaboration helped students achieve breakthroughs in their expressive abilities within this ‘reachable yet challenging’ space.

In addition, Yibin (2025), in a recent review of the developmental trajectory of POA, pointed out that future research should further expand the application of POA in vocational contexts and strengthen the connection between theory and empirical practice, particularly in terms of modular design and multi-source data validation. This study directly responds to that research agenda by systematically integrating POA principles with the writing needs of vocational college students. It designed a three-stage task-based module and empirically validated its effectiveness through a mixed-methods approach, thereby providing both theoretical support and a practical pathway for the extended application of POA in vocational EFL instruction.

This study employed a mixed-methods design, integrating multiple data sources—questionnaire surveys, pre- and post-tests, classroom observations, reflective journals, and stratified interviews—to build a systematic evidence chain demonstrating the multidimensional impacts of the POA module. This multi-perspective, triangulated approach not only strengthened the credibility of the findings but also provided practical guidance for future modular reforms in vocational college EFL writing instruction.

Practical Implications: Pedagogical Recommendations Based on POA Stages

The findings of this study indicate that the POA writing module has demonstrated positive effects in enhancing students’ writing proficiency and multidimensional learning abilities. To facilitate practical application by frontline teachers, the following pedagogical recommendations are organized according to the three stages of the POA framework:

(1) Motivating Stage: Task Initiation and Real-World Activation

Teachers are encouraged to design task chains closely aligned with professional contexts, such as a sequence involving a customer complaint email followed by an internal incident report, to stimulate students’ role awareness and motivation to express themselves.

Scenario simulations, group discussions, and brainstorming activities can be employed to activate students’ real-world engagement, using problem-based prompts (e.g., ‘*How can a job application stand out among many?*’) to highlight the task’s relevance.

Instruction should also emphasize writing purposes and audience awareness, helping students recognize the professional value of their writing tasks.

(2) Enabling Stage: Integrated Input and Skills Training

Teachers can provide model texts, sentence structures, and vocabulary banks aligned with the target tasks, enabling students to build up relevant language resources.

‘Micro-writing exercises’ should be used to break down specific skills—such as polite expressions, logical connectors, and paragraph transitions—thereby reducing cognitive load during full-task writing.

Students should be guided to create outlines and engage in peer discussions before writing, improving the coherence and structure of their output.

Peer review activities should be supported by structured evaluation checklists to help students identify issues in others’ texts and reflect on their own weaknesses, thereby strengthening self-regulation.

(3) Assessing Stage: Multi-Dimensional Feedback and Reflection

A three-tier feedback system—self-assessment, peer review, and teacher evaluation—should be implemented, with students using evaluation rubrics to analyze and revise their own and peers' drafts.

Teacher feedback should focus on key aspects such as linguistic accuracy, structural coherence, and task relevance, offering concrete and actionable revision suggestions.

Students should be encouraged to write reflective journals, guided by progressive prompts such as 'What did I learn?', 'What did I revise?', and 'How can I further improve?', to foster metacognitive awareness.

Assessment should focus on developmental goals, supporting students in building a sense of self-efficacy and gradually shifting their attention from writing products to writing processes.

Through this structured three-stage instructional design, the POA module not only offers students a clear pathway for writing development but also provides teachers with a practical and actionable guide for implementing task-driven instruction in vocational contexts.

Limitations and Future Directions

Despite the overall positive findings of this study, several limitations remain. First, the sample size was relatively small. Although the interview sample was representative, it still did not fully capture the diverse and complex changes of learners across different backgrounds. Second, the module implementation period was only seven weeks, and the long-term development of writing ability and its transferability to real workplace contexts require further, extended validation. Additionally, the data were mainly collected in the context of Chinese vocational colleges, so the cross-regional and interdisciplinary applicability of the findings remains to be explored.

Future research could be conducted with larger sample sizes and over longer periods of time to examine the transferability and sustainability of the POA module. It is also recommended to integrate digital platforms, AI-powered tools, or interdisciplinary collaboration to enhance the diversity and flexibility of modular instruction, further expanding both the practical pathways and theoretical foundations of English writing instruction in vocational colleges.

Particularly noteworthy is the rapid development of generative AI, with writing tools such as ChatGPT and Gemini increasingly being used in language teaching. As noted by Kankanhalli (2024), although Automated Writing Evaluation (AWE) systems can provide immediate feedback at the linguistic level, they still face significant challenges in fostering critical thinking, supporting independent expression, and upholding academic integrity. Therefore, future studies may explore how generative AI can be effectively embedded within the POA framework—for example, assisting students during the Enabling Stage with outlining and constructing logical frameworks—while ensuring that learners maintain independent thinking and originality. This would help realize the goal of “facilitative writing” supported by AI.

Challenges and Insights: Limited Gains in Vocational Relevance and Critical Thinking

Although students' overall writing performance showed significant improvement, it is noteworthy that the dimensions of Vocational Relevance and Critical Thinking exhibited relatively smaller gains. This highlights the practical challenges faced in promoting higher-order writing skills through short-term interventions.

Specifically, the Vocational Relevance score only increased by 0.7 points (+8.4%), the lowest among the six evaluated dimensions. In interviews, some students admitted that while they understood the “professional

context” of the writing tasks, they remained unclear about the appropriate linguistic style and formal register. One student stated, “I know I should write like a business email, but I’m still not sure about the tone and format used in real workplaces” (S5). This indicates that although students have basic productive abilities, mastering the deeper conventions of professional discourse still requires more systematic input and long-term training in register awareness. This supports the claim by Sun (2022), who pointed out that further research is needed on POA’s role in facilitating professional genre adaptation.

While the Critical Thinking dimension showed a relatively larger gain (+12.9%), individual differences were significant. Some students began experimenting with logical connectors such as cause-effect and concessive structures, but still struggled to construct clear stances or develop multi-perspective arguments. As Student S4 noted, “I still can’t think in multiple layers. Once I finish writing, I only check for errors and don’t think about how to make it better.” In contrast, S3 shared, “I started to think from the reader’s perspective—whether my sentence is convincing.” These reflections suggest an initial awakening of critical thinking awareness, yet its deeper development still requires more strategic and contextualized instructional support. A study by Castillo-Cuesta et al. (2021) found that digital storytelling can effectively stimulate students’ stance construction and logical expression in writing. This implies that while the POA module has strengths in promoting authentic tasks and learner expression, it still has room for improvement in cultivating deeper thinking skills. Integrating digital tools and interdisciplinary strategies could enrich the Enabling Stage and provide more structured thinking guidance.

Additionally, the module employed a low-tech intervention approach that emphasized task chains and reflection, which successfully boosted student engagement and language practice. However, compared to current trends of “technology-enhanced thinking development,” this approach remains relatively conservative. Hasumi and Chiu (2024) noted that the development of learner autonomy and thinking skills increasingly relies on technology-enhanced environments that offer visual feedback, collaborative construction, and multimodal input. Therefore, future module designs may consider incorporating AI-assisted platforms, writing diagnostic tools, or cross-task thinking activities while maintaining the logical structure of the POA’s three stages. This would help students better master professional genres and critical expression, fostering the integrated development of language proficiency and higher-order thinking.

In summary, vocational relevance and critical thinking—two key writing competencies—remain challenging to develop in short-term modules due to high cognitive demands, difficulties in genre transformation, and limited training duration. This finding underscores the urgent need for long-term support mechanisms in vocational English curriculum reform and offers a new perspective for expanding the application of POA theory in the construction of higher-level abilities.

CONCLUSION

This study, employing a mixed-methods design, systematically examined the implementation effects of the POA writing module among non-English major students in a Chinese vocational college. The findings revealed that the POA module not only significantly improved students’ overall writing performance and multidimensional writing outcomes but also effectively fostered their learner autonomy, writing confidence, and critical thinking awareness. These findings enrich the practical application of the Production-Oriented Approach in vocational college EFL writing instruction and provide empirical support for task-driven instructional reforms and the cultivation of key learner competencies. Future research could further investigate the applicability and sustainability of the POA module across different contexts and disciplines, using larger-scale samples and longer implementation periods.

Appendix A

Adapted IELTS Writing Band Descriptors

I. Task Achievement (20 Points)

1. Fully understands and addresses the requirements of the writing task.
2. Arguments are clear and highly relevant to the topic.
3. Content is well-developed, with sufficient details and examples to support the arguments.
4. Demonstrates clear awareness of the target audience and control over the purpose of writing.

II. Coherence and Cohesion (20 Points)

1. Information is well-organized, and the essay structure is logical.
2. Paragraphs are appropriately divided, with clear focus and distinct layers of development.
3. Connections between ideas are smooth, with appropriate use of transitional phrases.
4. A variety of cohesive devices are used to enhance the overall flow and coherence of the essay.

III. Lexical Resource (20 Points)

1. Uses accurate and appropriate vocabulary to express ideas.
2. Word choice matches the register and requirements of the writing topic.
3. Demonstrates a good range of vocabulary and flexibility in its usage.
4. Appropriately incorporates professional terms and expressions relevant to the topic.

IV. Grammatical Range and Accuracy (20 Points)

1. Grammatical structures are accurate, with minimal errors that do not impede meaning.
2. A variety of sentence types are used, reflecting flexibility in employing complex sentences.
3. Correct usage of tenses, voice, and subject-verb agreement.
4. Punctuation is used correctly to aid clarity and expression.

V. Vocational Relevance (10 Points)

1. Writing content aligns closely with practical vocational needs and workplace contexts.
2. Demonstrates the ability to handle realistic professional writing tasks.
3. Writing style is appropriate for workplace communication.
4. Reflects professional thinking and an industry-specific perspective.

VI. Critical Thinking (10 Points)

1. The argumentation process reflects multi-perspective thinking and in-depth analysis.
2. Presents original ideas and demonstrates innovative thinking.
3. Critically compares and evaluates different viewpoints with logical rigor.
4. Effectively uses facts and examples to support arguments in a balanced and persuasive way.

Total Score (Out of 100)

Task Achievement (20 points) + Coherence and Cohesion (20 points) + Lexical Resource (20 points) + Grammatical Range and Accuracy (20 points) + Vocational Relevance (10 points) + Critical Thinking (10 points)

Key Adaptations:

1. Retaining Core IELTS Dimensions: Essential aspects of the original IELTS descriptors, such as Task Achievement, Coherence and Cohesion, Lexical Resource, and Grammatical Range and Accuracy, are preserved to ensure comprehensive and professional evaluation.
2. Adding Vocational Relevance Dimension: This new criterion focuses on assessing how well the writing aligns with workplace demands and professional communication, emphasizing the context of vocational education.
3. Incorporating Critical Thinking: This dimension evaluates the ability to think analytically, critique viewpoints, and propose innovative ideas, reflecting the importance of cultivating critical thinking skills in writing.
4. Refining Scoring Criteria: Specific descriptors are tailored to highlight the connection with vocational contexts, ensuring the scoring standards effectively assess the writing ability of vocational college students.
5. Adjusting Weightage: The point allocation emphasizes dimensions most relevant to the study's objectives while maintaining the practicality of the scoring process.

This adapted scoring system balances theoretical rigor and practical relevance, providing a robust framework for evaluating English writing proficiency in vocational contexts.

Appendix B

Semi-Structured Interview Outline for Student Feedback on the POA Writing Teaching Module

Opening Remarks

Hello, thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this interview! The purpose of this interview is to understand your real experience and feelings during the process of learning the English writing module based on the 'Output-Oriented Approach' (POA). POA is a teaching method that emphasizes 'output-driven' and 'input-enabled' learning, aiming to improve students' English writing skills through authentic tasks. Your feedback will help us optimize the course design and provide insights for future teaching practices.

The interview will take around 30-40 minutes. It is informal, and you are free to express yourself. There are no right or wrong answers. If there are any questions you don't want to answer or if you'd like to end the interview at any time, that is completely fine. Also, all your responses will be kept confidential and used solely for academic research purposes.

For convenience, the interview will be recorded. Do you agree? If so, we can start now. Thank you again for your participation!

Part 1: Overall Evaluation of the Module (5-10 minutes)

1. Please share your overall experience and feelings about participating in this writing module.
2. Compared to your previous English writing learning experiences, what aspects of this module do you think were innovative? Specifically in terms of teaching philosophy, content, and methods.
3. Do you think the module's goals (such as improving professional writing skills, enhancing organizational ability, etc.) are clear and well-defined? Are these goals relevant to your career development needs?

Part 2: Content and Teaching Strategies (10-15 minutes)

1. Do the content and difficulty level of this module match your language proficiency and learning needs? Are the materials (such as business emails, reports, etc.) relevant to your career needs? Which content do you think is most helpful for your professional development?
2. How did the feedback from the teacher (such as on language accuracy, content organization, etc.) help your writing learning process? Do you wish to receive more support in certain areas?
3. Were the input materials (such as model essays, language explanations, videos, case studies, etc.) diverse and effective? Do you think these materials helped you complete writing tasks successfully?
4. In group discussions or peer reviews, which aspects were most helpful for improving your writing skills? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

Part 3: Learning Outcomes and Challenges (10-15 minutes)

1. After completing the module, which areas of your English writing skills have you seen significant improvement in? For example, language use, content organization, logical thinking, or writing strategies. Please describe your progress in detail.
2. Beyond writing skills, do you feel the module helped you develop critical thinking, self-learning ability, teamwork skills, etc.? Do you think these skills have benefited you in other courses or in your actual work?
3. What were the main challenges and difficulties you encountered during the learning process (such as task understanding, time management, application of writing strategies, etc.)? How did you adjust your learning strategies to overcome these challenges? Do you have any suggestions for future students to help them deal with these challenges more effectively?

Part 4: Learning Transfer and Suggestions for Improvement (10-15 minutes)

1. How do you think the skills and knowledge learned in this module, particularly writing skills, will help you achieve success in your career? Do you think these skills are transferable to interdisciplinary learning or other professional fields?
2. Based on your learning experience, in which areas do you think the module's content, teaching strategies, or activities could be further improved to better meet the learning needs and characteristics of vocational school students?

3.If similar writing modules are offered in the future, what innovations or improvements would you most like to see in the teaching content or teaching methods? (For example, teaching styles, assessment methods, learning resources, etc.)

Part 5: Additional Feedback (5 minutes)

1.How satisfied are you with the overall module? On a scale of 1 to 10, what score would you give, and why?

2.Do you think the content and activities of this module are practical? Will they help you address real-world writing challenges in your work?

3.Apart from what we have already discussed, do you have any other important thoughts or suggestions you would like to add?

Thank you very much for taking the time to participate in this interview! Your honest feedback and valuable suggestions are very important for optimizing the course design. Your insights will help us better understand students' learning needs and provide strong support for future teaching practices.

We assure you that all your responses will be kept strictly confidential and used only for academic research purposes. If you have any additional thoughts or suggestions after the interview, feel free to contact us at any time.

Thank you again for your participation and support! Wishing you great success in your future studies and career development!

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