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An Action Plan for the "Performative Output" Phenomenon in Primary School English Based on Sociocultural Theory and Task-Based Language Teaching

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Abstract: This study addresses the long-standing challenge of "performative output" prevalent in Chinese primary school students' English learning. This research proposes an action plan framework integrating Sociocultural Theory (SCT) and Task-Based Language Teaching (TBLT), shifting the teaching focus from isolated script imitation to scaffolded collaborative tasks within thematic units, and emphasizing the core value of language as a tool for real communication. Key implementation strategies include redefining the roles of various stakeholders, constructing teaching activities, and establishing an assessment system focused on communicative performance and strategic development. The plan aims to promote students' in-depth cognitive processing of language, enhance learning engagement, and ultimately achieve the transformation from "performative output" to "authentic communication" through principled and context-adaptive teaching adjustments.

Keywords: primary school students; performative output; Sociocultural Theory; Task-Based Language Teaching

1. Introduction

The dilemma of "performative output" in Chinese primary school students' English learning is a long-standing and pedagogically significant issue. This study focuses on the core problem: while students can fluently repeat dialogues, recite pre-set scripts, or complete mechanical sentence drills in class, they struggle to produce coherent and context-appropriate language expressions in unscripted real communicative scenarios (e.g., impromptu Q&A, situational description, and opinion sharing), often experiencing speech hesitation, off-topic expression, or mechanical application of fixed sentence patterns [1]. Although this observation stems from classroom teaching and after-class tutoring experience, academic literature reviews confirm that it is not an isolated case but a common pedagogical phenomenon in current Chinese primary school English classrooms [2].

This problem is rooted in the specific context of mainstream primary school English classrooms in China. Curriculum progress requirements and large-class teaching (usually 40-45 students) often force teaching to focus on explicit declarative knowledge transmission [3]. Most language output activities are teacher-led scripted training, leaving students with insufficient opportunities for contextualized and interactive application [4]. While this teaching model aims to quickly achieve "superficial output effects," it neglects the cognitive processing and social interaction necessary for language internalization [5]. Its low effectiveness impacts multiple stakeholders: for students, long-term performative output solidifies mechanical memory habits, undermines confidence in language communication, and even fosters learning anxiety and weariness [5]; for teachers, it easily leads to the misjudgment that "students have mastered the knowledge," making it difficult

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to accurately identify real learning gaps and resulting in targeted teaching adjustments [6]; for schools and curriculum designers, this phenomenon deviates from the fundamental goal of cultivating students' core competencies and developing functional English proficiency [7].

Addressing the "performative output" problem is not only necessary to improve the quality of language teaching but also fundamentally significant for achieving the broader goals of language education. China's Compulsory Education English Curriculum Standards (2022 Edition) emphasizes the cultivation of core competencies, including language ability, thinking quality, cultural awareness, and learning ability—all of which rely on real language communication practices [7]. Performative output merely involves the mechanical reproduction of language forms, failing to promote students' in-depth understanding of language meaning and pragmatic rules, leading to an imbalance in the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills [2]. Without effective intervention, students will gradually lose the ability to flexibly use English, struggle to adapt to language learning requirements in higher grades, and fail to meet the practical needs of cross-cultural communication in the context of globalization [4]. Therefore, researching and implementing targeted intervention strategies is a key measure to cultivate independent and efficient language learners, and holds important practical significance for promoting the transformation of primary school English teaching towards "communication orientation."

2. Theoretical Analysis and Framework Construction

2.1. Root Cause Diagnosis

The emergence of the "performative output" phenomenon is the result of the interplay of multiple factors: pedagogically, the traditional model focuses on scripted drilling and mechanical repetition, separating language knowledge from real communicative contexts and depriving students of opportunities for meaning negotiation and flexible application [8]; cognitively, primary school students predominantly rely on concrete thinking, and scripted learning through mechanical memory only engages surface-level cognitive processing, failing to establish deep connections between language forms, meaning, and context, making it difficult to develop flexible application abilities [9]; emotionally and motivationally, the classroom emphasis on "error-free performance" creates a high-anxiety environment, leading students to rely on fixed scripts for fear of making mistakes, while mechanically repetitive activities lack intrinsic communicative motivation, further solidifying the behavioral pattern of performative output [10].

2.2. Theoretical Framework Proposal

To address the dilemma of "performative output," this study constructs an intervention framework based on the in-depth integration of SCT and TBLT. The integration of the two has inherent logical consistency: TBLT, with goal-oriented meaningful tasks as its core structure, creates real communicative needs for language and serves as a practical carrier to break scripted output; SCT reveals the social-interactive nature of language learning, providing theoretical support for students to move from mechanical imitation to real communication through scaffolding, tool mediation, and internalization mechanisms. Working synergistically, they not only clarify the "task-based" teaching path but also clarify the "interaction-centered" development logic, forming a closed-loop intervention system.

This integrated framework is implemented through four core principles, each crucial for addressing performative output and fostering authentic communicative competence. First, the contextualization principle: language output is always carried out in meaningful, theme-based scenarios or problem-solving tasks. TBLT provides a structured carrier for such contexts through its core use of real tasks, while SCT holds that language and learning are inherently contextualized cultural activities, making context not only auxiliary but indispensable for the in-depth understanding and flexible application of language [10]. Second, the usage-oriented principle: emphasizing that the core of

language teaching and learning is purposeful communicative application. TBLT requires students to use language to complete specific tasks, transcending passive form memory and mechanical recognition, while SCT supplements and deepens this through viewing language learning as an internalization process derived from social interactive use [9]. Third, the scaffolding teaching principle oriented to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD): SCT defines the ZPD as the area where learners can achieve more with guidance than independently. In practice, this is achieved through carefully designed scaffolding—temporary and adjustable support from teachers or peers during collaborative task phases (e.g., planning discussions, result sharing). This support can take forms such as demonstration, guided questioning, or co-construction, precisely calibrated to help learners understand and apply communicative methods and language forms that are just beyond their current independent abilities. TBLT's phased cycle naturally provides a collaborative space where such ZPD-sensitive adjustments can systematically occur [11]. Finally, the emotional support principle: prioritizing the creation of a safe, low-anxiety learning environment. SCT recognizes the interdependence of cognitive and emotional development in social interaction, while TBLT's focus on task completion rather than linguistic perfection helps reduce students' performance anxiety, providing psychological assurance for attempts at authentic communication [11].

2.3. Key Activity Design

Based on the integrated framework of SCT and TBLT, three types of progressive core teaching activities are designed to promote students' gradual transition from scripted imitation to authentic communication.

Thematic Collaborative Task Cycle: Each thematic unit (e.g., Planning a Weekend Picnic, Campus Environmental Protection Initiative) is designed with a three-phase closed-loop task. Based on scaffolded input, 3-4 person groups complete core tasks through division of labor and collaboration, deepen language application through meaning negotiation, and ultimately achieve consolidation and improvement through result presentation, targeted teacher feedback, and peer evaluation. The entire process incorporates SCT's scaffolding support and TBLT's task-oriented philosophy [11]. For example, in the "Campus Environmental Protection Initiative" unit, reference can be made to the "goal setting—division of labor and collaboration—output" process in task-based teaching [4], with groups assuming roles such as "environmental problem researchers," "initiative designers," and "initiative promoters," completing the transformation from language input to real output through collaboration.

Contextualized Impromptu Interaction Tasks: To break script dependence, 1-2 impromptu communicative tasks closely related to daily life (e.g., Ordering Food in a Restaurant, Asking for Directions, Sharing Weekend Experiences) are designed monthly. Only core situational prompts are provided, without fixed dialogue templates. Before the task, simple functional language frameworks and short-term peer discussions are offered; during the task, emphasis is placed on fluency and communicative achievement, encouraging students to flexibly adjust their expressions to adapt to real interactive scenarios [10]. Strategies such as situational creation to support language use from drama education can be drawn on [12]. For example, before the Ordering Food in a Restaurant task, the logical flow of interactive ordering is presented through scenario simulation, guiding students to sort out core expression frameworks and reducing anxiety about impromptu expression.

Cross-Group Peer Teaching Tasks: After every two thematic units, cross-group peer teaching activities are carried out. Each group selects a sub-theme of the unit (e.g., Farm Animals, Pets under the Animals unit), designs a 5-minute mini-teaching plan including core knowledge sharing and communicative scenario interaction exercises (e.g., role-play), and delivers the teaching to other groups. Through the "teaching output—interactive feedback" model, language in-depth internalization and authentic communicative competence improvement are promoted based on SCT's knowledge co-construction philosophy [6]. In activity design, ideas such as interactive games to consolidate language

difficulties can be integrated [13]. For example, when teaching the Farm Animals theme, an Animal Name Association Game is designed to combine target vocabulary with interactive games, achieving simultaneous language consolidation and communicative practice during teaching.

In the intervention practice for "performative output" in primary school English, teachers need to master task design, scaffolding support, and dynamic adjustment skills under the SCT-TBLT integrated framework through specialized training, develop thematic task packages, and construct a low-anxiety interactive environment [5]; for example, teachers can refer to the differentiated task design strategy to assign adaptive task roles to students with different language proficiency levels—e.g., students with weaker foundations are responsible for situational description, while those with stronger foundations are responsible for impromptu dialogue expansion. Students should transform into active collaborators, participate in meaning negotiation through group tasks, conduct self-reflection and peer evaluation, and deepen language internalization [3]; schools need to provide teaching resources, optimize classroom layout and time allocation, and build teacher professional development platforms [7], such as organizing task-based teaching strategy workshops; policymakers can incorporate communicative competence into evaluation standards and provide financial support, forming a complete support system from theoretical implementation to practical promotion through multi-stakeholder collaboration, helping students transition from scripted performance to authentic language communication [7].

To scientifically and accurately measure the effectiveness of the intervention plan, this study constructs a multi-dimensional assessment system focused on communicative performance and strategic development, avoiding over-reliance on paper-and-pencil tests. First, a pre-test and post-test comparative design is adopted, with spontaneous communicative tasks such as role-play and situational description used at the beginning and end of the semester to quantitatively assess the dynamic changes in students' language application abilities [5]; reference can be made to the two-dimensional assessment indicators of language skills and expression literacy [5]. Second, classroom observation is integrated, with teachers systematically tracking students' participation, peer interaction quality, and expression adjustment abilities during tasks through structured observation checklists, and recording student changes; the observation checklist can include communication-oriented indicators such as whether to take the initiative to initiate interaction and whether to flexibly adjust expressions to adapt to peer responses.

3. Reflection, Challenges, and Synthesis

Formulating this action plan has transformed my understanding of language teaching from "knowledge transmission" to "promoting meaningful interaction and internalization." I now recognize that the core role of teachers is not to provide perfect scripts, but to design scaffolded, context-rich tasks that allow students to construct language meaning through social interaction [9].

However, the application of this plan also faces certain challenges. A significant practical challenge is balancing task participation and language accuracy in large-class teaching. In such contexts, high-achieving students may dominate group interactions, while low-achieving students may retreat to passive participation or reliance on simple memorized phrases, limiting their progress towards authentic communication [5]. This issue can be addressed by referring to the differentiated role assignment strategy [6], designing differentiated task goals for students at different levels. Another challenge is reconciling assessment with communicative goals under the pressure of traditional evaluation systems. Teachers and students may face pressure to prioritize exam scores, leading to potential regression to scripted drilling and thus undermining intervention effects [4]. In response, efforts can be made to incorporate communicative performance assessment into the school's teaching quality evaluation system [2], guiding the teaching focus towards authentic communication. These challenges essentially reflect the conflict

between communication-oriented teaching and traditional teaching inertia, which requires finding a balance through theoretical adaptation and practical innovation [14].

By integrating SCT and TBLT into a coherent solution to the performative output problem, this plan embodies the overall goal of cultivating principled and adaptive language teachers. The process of formulating the plan has transformed my problem-solving approach in language teaching: instead of relying on fragmented teaching skills, I now use theoretical frameworks to diagnose root causes and design systematic, context-adaptive intervention measures.

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