

A Case Study on Teaching Reform of Academic English for Postgraduates based on an Agricultural University in China

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Abstract:

In the globalized situation of Chinese Higher Education, a survey and analysis was conducted on the teaching reform of postgraduate English in an Agricultural University which belongs to the provincial authority. After the comparison of teaching performance between previous and post teaching reform, it was found that the students' applying capabilities of language were improved rapidly, including academic reading, writing and communicative abilities. What's more, it is pointed that it needs to be continued to study how to assess the students' academic abilities in using English language to search their related information.

Key words: Academic English; English for Specific Purpose (ESP); English for Academic Purpose (EAP); English teaching reform

Introduction

In 2010, the Ministry of Education promulgated the "National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan Outline (2010--2020)" (hereinafter referred to as the Outline) "encourage school advantage subject facing the world, supporting the participation and setting up the international academic cooperation organization, scientific planning, support and the high level of education, scientific research institutions at home and abroad, setting up joint research and development base. We will accelerate the pace of building world-class universities and high-level universities, train a number of top-notch and innovative talents, develop world-class disciplines, and produce a number of internationally leading original achievements, thus contributing to the improvement of China's overall national strength." Guided by the spirit of the guidelines, "strive to cultivate faith, persistence, and good moral character, knowledge, skill excellent professional talents and top creative talents", namely "with international vision, familiar with international rules, to participate in international affairs and international competition" has become one of the teaching goal of many colleges and universities in China, in order to achieve this goal, college has established a number of measures, such as "exploring a variety of ways using foreign high-quality education resources, the introduction of overseas high-level academic team, the introduction of excellent teaching material, increase the proportion of hiring foreign teachers of institutions of higher learning" (Jigang Cai, Ningyang Chen. 2013:3). Under the background of internationalization of higher education in our country, the author made a research and analysis on non-English major academic postgraduate English teaching of a provincial agricultural university, and made a comparison before and after the reform of teaching, summarizes the concrete embodiment of students' English language application ability improvement after the teaching reform and also points out the further reform of English teaching.

1. Literature Review

English for Specific Purpose (ESP) conforms to the development of college English teaching in Chinese colleges and universities, and can also meet the demand of the society for high-end talents. It is a perfect combination of language skills training and professional knowledge learning (Zhizhong Gu, 2010:10). As British scholar Pauline Robinson (1980:6) said, the teaching of language itself is not the end of ESP, but the real purpose of ESP is to use language to achieve a definite goal.

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As an offshoot of ESP, academic English (EAP) usually occurs in an English-speaking environment (Hutchinson & Waters 1987:17). At the university of Birmingham, UK, Tim Johns (1974) published in his paper titled *EAP Course Communicative Teaching Method*, because of the emergence and development background, EAP is defined as “offer intensive English courses for students, the aim is to help learners to speak English as a medium of learning professional knowledge or research activities” (Flowerdew & Peacock 2001:8; Hyland 2006:1; Jordan 1997:1). With the expansion of international communication, English has become an academic lingua franca (Whong 2009). The teaching environment of EAP has been continuously extended to countries where English is the second language, even including countries and regions where English is a foreign language. The scope of EAP learners has also been expanded from students to teachers and researchers (Hyland & Hamp-Lyons 2002:2; Hyland 2006:10).

At present, there are more and more researches on English teaching for non-English majors in China, especially for comprehensive universities. Such as Jianbin Zeng (2013) made a key university academic English demand analysis, 250 graduate students suggested that schools should according to the graduate school needs to set academic, practical and professional academic English courses, in order to realize the tool, to master English professional learning, academic research, and international communication goals. NaLi and Weihua Hu (2014, 35-48) investigated and analyzed social and professional needs as well as learners’ motivation, concepts and strategies for oral English learning, trying to construct a framework for ESP oral English teaching design for non-English major graduate students in colleges and universities. Tiantian Luo and Chongyue Li (2015) analyzed the English learning motivation of Jiangsu University graduate students and relevant factors that influence their learning motivation through questionnaires, analyzed the relationship between them and EAP teaching, and put forward some relevant teaching suggestions. These are basically to investigate the needs of students, society, professional needs, and related factors affecting the English learning of graduate students, and to put forward suggestions on teaching reform, but there is a lack of empirical research on teaching.

In recent years, investigations and researches on English teaching for graduate students of specific majors in some schools have been reported successively, such as English teaching for law (Peng Xiao, 2015:137), English teaching for graduate students of tourism management, and English teaching for graduate students of engineering (Yingji Zhao and Wenqiu Wang, 2013,29). There are many researches on medical English teaching, for example, English teaching for medical postgraduate students (Yi Lu, 2009); ESP curriculum for graduate students in Chinese medical schools (ZexuanChen, 2015:108). However, there are few researches on English teaching for postgraduate students in agricultural universities. This study is an empirical study. The questionnaire not only contains a survey on students’ learning status, but also a survey on the teaching effect after the teaching reform. We use education comparative research, have made the domestic provincial an agricultural college English teaching reform of postgraduate curriculum setting, teaching material selection, teaching contents, and teaching effect. We expect to provide the references to English teaching course system construction of non-English major postgraduates’ in other agricultural colleges.

2. Research Design

2.1 Research Objects

The object of this study is the non-English major postgraduate students in a provincial agricultural college in northeast China. Compared with the English teaching of graduate students in key universities, the English foundation of graduate students in provincial agricultural colleges is relatively low, while the tutors of graduate students have high expectations for students to learn specialized courses and conduct scientific research in English. However, with the continuous reform of the postgraduate training program in colleges and universities, the hours allocated to English teaching in the training program are decreasing. This level of postgraduate English teaching is in a more awkward position, this kind of college English teaching can neither work like key colleges and universities, by a professional class teacher that has a good command of English in English teaching of specialized course, nor mentor to use imported full translation teaching methods of English teaching in specialized course teaching. The school can’t function like a lot of ordinary undergraduate course colleges and universities which have limited the student whose English foundation is poor and stalled. They still use the traditional teaching method, teaching English only basic knowledge, cultivate the students’ English listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation of the five basic skills. Therefore, the reform of English teaching for non-English major postgraduates in provincial agricultural colleges is representative. We chose the academic postgraduate students from 2015 to 2017 as the research objects. The number of graduate students is between 100 and 130 each year, with three teaching classes.

In contrast, the number of graduate students from 2012 to 2014 is still between 100 and 130, with three classes. There are 4 English teachers participating in the teaching reform, including 1 professor, 2 associate professors and 1 lecturer.

2.2 Research Contents and Problems

We study the content of a traditional postgraduate English teaching and the teaching of English for special purposes, finding out the agricultural colleges academic postgraduate English teaching as the breakthrough point of the professional teaching service. We make English teaching back to the origin of language tools, to better improve the level of the cultivation of the graduate students in agricultural colleges and universities in the country, to carry more senior talents with international academic communication ability.

Based on the above teaching objectives, we began to change the English teaching for postgraduates from general English teaching to special-purpose English teaching in 2015. Before 2015, the English teaching for graduate students was general English teaching, using the reading and listening and speaking courses in the series of "Contemporary Graduate English" textbooks of Foreign Language Research Press, and adopting the traditional teaching method of teacher lecturing and students participating in teaching activities. Since the fall semester of 2015, our teaching contents are divided into agricultural English reading, international academic English communication (first semester) and academic English reading, writing and communication (second semester). The flipped classroom model is adopted, with students as the center and teachers as the planning and guidance of teaching activities to guide and urge students to study independently.

In order to carry out the teaching reform, we designed a questionnaire. After two rounds of teaching, we made another questionnaire to investigate the teaching effect and the main contents of the questionnaire are:

- (1) under the background of internationalization of higher education, what are the motivation, study habits, learning difficulties and factors influencing the academic performance of graduate students?
- (2) after the teaching reform, what are the improvements in the language ability of the postgraduate students in specialized courses in English?

3. Data collection and survey results

We conducted two questionnaires on the English teaching of postgraduates in the past three years. One is on the study status of students, and the other is on the teaching effect after the reform of postgraduates' English teaching.

3.1 Questionnaire I: Survey on English Learning of Graduate Students

We conducted a study survey on the graduate students of 2015. The survey scope was 64 graduate students that were selected from 125 graduate students of 2015, and about 20 students were randomly selected from each class in three classes. All questionnaires issued were withdrawn.

In this survey, we found that 34.4% of students learn English to meet the needs of future jobs, and 31.3% of students learn English to obtain CET-4 and CET-6 certificates. Listening is one of the most difficult questions for students, and it is also one of the questions that students lose the most points in the exam. This part of students think that they should strengthen their study, accounting for 48.4%, 43.8% and 71.9% respectively. Students' favorite English learning activity is watching English videos, accounting for 56.3 percent. Of course, 29.7 percent of them believe that learning English should be actively participated in teaching activities rather than passively listening to lectures. At the same time, 35.9% of the students think that the outdated teaching equipment is a major problem in our school. When students encounter difficulties in learning English, 43.8% of them solve the problems by searching for information. However, when faced with unsatisfactory English performance, they are helpless and have no ideas or actions. These students account for 35.9% of the total respondents (see Table 1).

Table 1: A survey on the English learning of postgraduates

Questions	Most of the options
1. What motivated you to learn English?	(2) future work demand 22/64=34.4% (4) 20/64=31.3%
2. Which part of daily English learning do you think is the most difficult part?	(3) listening 21/64=48.4%
3. The English learning program you would most like to strengthen	(1) listening and speaking 40/64=62.5%
4. In the English test (including cet-4 and cet-6), what is the most lost question?	(1) Listening 46/64=71.9%
5. What do you do when you have difficulty in learning English?	(3) check the data by yourself 28/64=43.8%
What is your favorite class activity?	(5) watching English video 36/64=56.3%
7. What do you think is the problem of English teaching in our school?	(4) obsolete teaching equipment 23/64=35.9%
8. What do you think is the main reason that affects your English performance?	(2) class learning atmosphere 27/64=42.3%
9. When your English is not good, do you?	(4) no thoughts or actions 23/64=35.9%
I think the following is the best way to improve my English	(5) spend more time actively participating in learning activities instead of passively listening to lectures. 19/64=29.7%

3.2 Questionnaire II: Teaching Effect Survey

After a semester of study, students like this teaching content very much and can take the initiative to learn. In 2017, we did a questionnaire survey on the students in Grade 2015 and 2016, there were 119 students taking part in the paper, with academic reading teaching effect is very good, is very helpful in professional foreign language information, 81 students, effectively account for 68% of the total, there are 30 people said neither agreed nor opposition, and don't agree with students is only eight people, accounting for 6.72% of the total number of answers. This fully reflects that students generally like this teaching content and teaching methods, teaching effect is good. Secondly, the students who participated in the questionnaire think that the teaching effect of academic paper writing is very good. 81 students, accounting for 66.07% of the total number, think that the teaching effect of academic paper writing is very good. In addition, students like foreign teachers' oral English classes very much. In our questionnaire, 83 people agree that foreign teachers' oral English classes are very helpful for international academic English communication, accounting for 69.75% of the total number, while only 8 people disagree, accounting for 6.72% of the total number. Students especially like to give lectures on their own research fields in teaching classes outside the university. They think this teaching activity is very helpful to participate in academic exchanges in the future.

4. Research and Analysis

4.1 Teaching Contents and Methods

Before the reform of postgraduate teaching, we used the textbook Modern Postgraduate English published by Foreign Language Research Press to cultivate students' five basic skills of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, so as to improve their comprehensive English application ability. Since 2015, we have been trying to reform the English teaching for graduate students.

The reform of English teaching for academic postgraduates in provincial agricultural colleges should not only take into account the low English foundation in the entrance of postgraduates, but also consider that the tutors of specialized courses require students to have the ability to search, read and write academic papers in English. Therefore, we divide the English teaching of graduate students into two stages: the first stage is the first semester. The emphasis of English teaching is on agricultural English teaching, which is a transition from general English to academic English. The teachers mainly teach the reading of agricultural English and the English communication at academic conferences.

We choose the “English Reading Course for Graduate Students” published by China Agricultural Press and Academic English Communication published by higher education press as teaching materials, mainly using the traditional teaching methods and group cooperative learning methods. In the second semester of English teaching for graduate students, the emphasis of English teaching is on academic English teaching, mainly on reading, writing and academic communication of English literature. We use all the teaching materials as the source to study, which includes the textbook of Graduate Student English Academic Paper Writing Foundation published by Fudan University Press, students’ 10 English academic thesis on their profession, students own personal written English academic papers and professional and scientific research, mainly use the task-based teaching model, and take the students as the center, teachers do counseling of personalized teaching methods.

4.2 Teaching Effect

Before the reform of English teaching for graduate students, the improvement of students’ English ability was limited to basic skills, which strengthened students’ ability of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, broadened students’ cultural vision of English-speaking countries, and improved the passing rate of CET-4 and CET-6. Since 2015, we have made reforms in English teaching for graduate students. After three years of reform and practice in English teaching for postgraduates from 2015 to 2017, we have worked hard and won great support from postgraduates and tutors, as well as recognition from students. After the reform of English teaching, we have gained more achievements in teaching.

(1) improved students’ reading ability of academic papers

The second semester of postgraduate English teaching focuses on the reading and writing of academic papers. Our teaching requirement is that each student should find 10 classic academic papers in his or her own field, and these papers must be written by native English speakers. We are required to read three of them carefully and to read extensively the other papers. We asked the students in the process of reading, in addition to understand the inside of the paper the research content, experiment method, want to combine academic paper writing textbooks, will focus on learning academic paper writing norms and language points, in the thesis to find the pattern is commonly used in academic papers, phrases and grammar, and other important language knowledge, students are required to do the study notes. After a month of reading training, students generally reported that they could read English literature independently with the help of dictionaries, which laid a good foundation for opening the thesis and carrying out scientific research, and greatly improved the learning of specialized courses.

(2) improved students’ academic paper writing ability

While we read academic papers, we train students to write academic papers. After reading one part of the paper, students are required to write their own academic English papers using the language knowledge they find in the format of the paper. Therefore, our writing assignments are divided into: paper topic, author and unit; Abstract, introduction, academic review, experimental preparation and methods, experimental data and charts (experimental results), discussion of results, conclusions, etc. We tell students to follow an experiment or a research project before they start writing, so that at the end of the semester they are required to summarize all the writing in accordance with academic norms into a journal paper that can be submitted as part of the final semester assessment. The teaching effect of a semester is very obvious, all students get academic paper writing training, nearly a third of the students can take this learning opportunity to cooperate with the tutor to complete the English paper writing at the end of the semester, and the academic paper published in English journals at home and abroad.

(3) improved students’ international academic English communication skills

In terms of improving the international academic English communication ability, we adopt the way of joint teaching by foreign teachers and Chinese teachers. Chinese teachers use international academic English textbooks in their listening courses in the first semester. In addition to practicing the listening and speaking content in the textbooks, we also ask students to use professional vocabulary to introduce professional knowledge, research content, academic achievements of researchers or tutors as much as possible in combination with their own major and research field. In the second semester, we simulated the academic English communication conference. Students simulated the keynote speaker to make the professional introduction or research report. Teachers and all students acted as the participating scholars and experts to ask questions on the report content. All mock presentations and responses to questions are in the form and content of an oral exam. Through such a simulation exercise, improve students’ academic communication level.

(4) improve students' independent learning ability in learning English

We pay attention to the independent learning ability of students, for this reason, we set up a QQ group for students, to the group regularly upload learning materials, also requires students to upload their own homework, for the whole class to refer to learning. Teachers also provide self-study websites to students, guiding students to find suitable learning materials for their abilities after class for self-study. At the same time, we have different learning requirements for students with different English proficiency, conduct regular independent learning inspection, and provide students with opportunities to display their learning results in class. In addition, we set up English study groups based on students' majors to promote mutual learning among students and jointly improve their interest and autonomy in learning English.

Conclusion

Teaching reform is not a matter of one day, but a process of gradual improvement and renewal. In particular, the reform of English teaching needs the understanding, participation and support of multiple departments. The reform of English teaching for graduate students is strongly supported by the leadership of the graduate department or the college, and the understanding and cooperation of the graduate tutors can be carried out smoothly.

After the reform of English teaching for graduate students, we return English teaching to language tools to provide students with professional knowledge. This is the direction of the current college English teaching reform, especially the provincial normal college graduate English teaching should find a teaching position, will school talent training scheme was carried out in a foreign language for the purpose of the specialized service, education for colleges and universities play a proper role in line with international standards as soon as possible, thereby conveying to the nation more senior talents with foreign language application ability.

Although we have tried to teach esp and academic English, we have generally improved students' autonomous learning ability and their ability to read, write and communicate in academic English. However, we need a comprehensive evaluation system that can comprehensively assess students' use of English language tools for scientific research activities. We will focus on the evaluation research of academic English in the next step.

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