

Study on the Cultivation of the Academic English Reading and Writing Ability of Non-English Major Postgraduates

Ying Chen

College of Foreign Languages, Inner Mongolia University, Hohhot, 010021, China

Abstract

There are still some problems in the cultivation of the academic English reading and writing ability of non-English major postgraduates, such as inner fear, unfamiliarity with academic norms, and lack of professional training, though research requirements motivate students. To solve those problems, this paper offers a practical teaching approach to effectively improve academic English reading and writing ability. In addition, the paper analyzes the impact of the combination of reading and writing on students' research abilities. This paper may shed light on the cultivation mode of similar direction.

Keywords

Academic English; The Postgraduates; Reading; Writing.

1. Introduction

Academic English or English for Academic Purposes, which is abbreviated as EAP, is mainly referred to focus on the improvement of English reading and writing ability, with a stress on writing ability in the professional fields. It lays a solid linguistic foundation for the students' professional course study and future development and meets the needs of students who use English to learn their majors.

General English, required for a Bachelor Degree, focuses on general communication, though EAP shares both similarities and differences. Academic English can enhance the basic language knowledge and skill for postgraduates in their major development, and at the same time, it can improve their general English. To a great degree, it covers general English, and it can be considered to be the advanced level of the former.

Academic English includes two parts: one is for the cultivation of skill development, such as listening to an academic lecture, taking notes for a research paper, summarization, and presenting at an international conference. Another aspect is the cultivation of language ability, such as writing a research paper or report by utilizing academic language. Therefore, academic English ability is fundamental for postgraduates' professional study and academic communication.

The Teaching Guideline for Non-English Majors (the first language) of the Chinese Ministry of Education showed that the purpose of English teaching at the postgraduate level was to help students grasp the language to aid their professional study, research, and international communication. (1) From it we could notice that the requirement for postgraduates' English ability was primarily focused on basic language training and improved reading ability. In October 2015, the State Department published *the Overall Plan for the Coordination of the Construction of the World-class Universities and Disciplines* in which it stressed that the short-term emphasis of educational reform was to upgrade the comprehensive and international competitive power of Chinese higher education. (2) The plan presented a new challenge for talent training in colleges and universities, which included postgraduate training. In 2017, *the 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of Academic Degrees and Postgraduate Education*

demanded the cultivation of graduates equipped with advanced talents, international vision, multi-cultural communication ability, understanding of international rules, and the capability to participate in world affairs and competition. (3) Realizing this goal requires improvement of postgraduates' general English and academic English. "The academic English teaching trains the students' academic ability in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, meanwhile it should cover more complicated skills, such as the research skills, the critical thinking skills, and the creative thinking skills." (4) Among these goals, the cultivation of academic English reading and writing is the most critical because it has a profound impact on the postgraduates' English learning process. Compared to the undergraduates, postgraduates have more intensive needs for using English, such as accessing the latest international research resources and writing high-level research papers. The postgraduates' comprehension of both Chinese and international research in their professional field is based on the grasp of academic English reading.

When they were absorbed in the reading materials, the writing would be formed naturally. The cultivation of academic English reading and writing centers on boosting the postgraduates' comprehensive expression ability through a series of language input activities. These include reading, understanding, and analyzing English academic articles to enhance the students' academic English writing. Additionally postgraduates are encouraged to write and publish papers in English following the international research norms and to present at international forums. Such exposure is key in the evaluation of the postgraduate English teaching system. Undoubtedly, the development of students' academic English reading and writing is the top priority in the postgraduates' English teaching, for it has great significance not only for the student's individual development but also to upgrade the research capacity of colleges and universities.

2. Survey of the Current Situation for Non-English Major Postgraduates' Academic English Reading and Writing Ability

(1) The basic English ability for postgraduates

The level of basic English plays a vital role in one's academic English. With poor basic English, the students usually struggle to choose academic English words and make foolish mistakes in the structure of their sentences in English writing. Effective academic English reading and writing can't be conducted until the students' English level reaches an appropriate level. Comparison of data from a questionnaire targeted at postgraduate students in their first semester demonstrated great differences between the social science and the natural science students. For the majors in social science, nearly 70% of students passed CET-6 while only 40% natural science students passed. Additionally one-third of students in natural science majors failed to pass CET-4. According to the Guideline of CET-4 and CET-6, the former is aimed at students who had accomplished English study during their 4 years of college, and the latter is for the higher-level university students or postgraduates. The questionnaire results indicate that for postgraduates who failed to meet the minimum standard of college English, their weak basic English level would influence their academic English level.

(2) The academic English ability for postgraduates

To accurately learn about the postgraduates' English ability, the questionnaire included the students' self-evaluation of their English. The feedback showed that almost 85% of students reported that they had never been exposed to academic English, and 9% of students said they had read some international journals but couldn't relate to them. Not a single postgraduate responded positively to questions about academic vocabulary comprehension or clear understanding of academic articles. All the students expressed that they hadn't received any formal professional training in academic English during their undergraduate period, so they

had great trouble reading and understanding the professional English articles. Therefore, they couldn't keep up with the latest research developments. Furthermore their professional knowledge lagged behind students from other countries. Finally, their research could not be published due to grammar mistakes, evident computer mis-translations, or the use of Chinglish. Although the students' overall academic English level was low, we were delighted to discover that over 90% of students surveyed urgently desired to improve their academic English ability. In the first year of their Master's degree, they realized that their academic English ability was closely tied to their future employment, further study, and academic development. In addition, the postgraduates were consciously aware that "language study is not a single activity, instead it is an exploratory and creative activity that can hold multiple training abilities." (5) Therefore, the cultivation of academic reading and writing ability for the non-English major would play a crucial role in improving the postgraduates' English levels.

3. The Cultivation for the Academic English Reading Ability

All the postgraduates surveyed admitted that academic English reading and writing was an essential component for the successful research, and they all desired to improve their academic English level to prepare for future academic exchanges. Therefore, they had an intense interest in the textbook---*Reading and Writing for Research Papers* which was published by Tsing Hua University Press. "This textbook stresses learning reading and writing for the research paper on the basis of the project, and helps students get prepared for their academic English reading and writing. It also intends to make the students understand the frame of the research paper writing and the writing routines for each section in a research paper. The textbook transcends the boundary between different majors and aims to accomplish a whole research paper writing process with IMRD (introduction, method, result, and discussion) and with APA format". (6) With the guidance of the book, we stuck to a principle by "promoting writing by reading" in our teaching process and helped the students integrate reading with writing at the final stage.

During the process of cultivating the academic English reading ability, we focused on academic critical thinking, and offered guidance for the students as they tried to understand the relevant information, concept, and words to include in a research paper. With the analysis of the structure of a paper, we trained the students to look through the resources, and reached a conclusion. Since reading academic research could be a tedious process especially if the article was not in their major, postgraduates may fail to sustain concentration. Sometimes the students posed the question: "Why do we need to read these irrelevant articles? Why not just teach us how to write a research paper?" When confronted with those challenges, the teacher should patiently explain to them the relation between language input and output. Because every excellent research paper must be based on abundant academic reading, we offered students reading materials beyond the textbook articles, such as articles published in *Science* or *Nature*. We selected several paragraphs which were under the topic of "academic reading". After the postgraduates found that the significance of academic reading had already been conducted as a research project, they understood it without any complaints.

Throughout the whole teaching process, we teach the postgraduates how to read a research paper through intensive and extensive reading. They need to learn how to grasp the author's main point during and to establish their literature review. In the beginning, most students didn't know how to take academic notes, so they just underlined or circled some words in the texts. To solve this problem, the teacher asked them to locate the key sentence in a paragraph and express its main idea. In addition, when the students finished a passage, they practiced skills through exercises in recalling the key point of the passage from memory, or writing the most important three points, or introducing the article to their classmates in only one minute. Also, to improve the postgraduates' reading abilities, the teachers provided plentiful learning

exercises to practice academic vocabulary and sentence patterns. The resources were abundant in content, convenient in usage, and practical in application. These methods all transformed passive reading into active reading and built a solid foundation for academic writing.

4. The Cultivation for the Academic English Writing Ability

Most students desperately need systematic guidance in academic writing. With no previous training in this area, the students were not competent in the choice and application of academic vocabulary, nor aware of research paper norms. They were full of fear and treated academic English writing as “an impossible mission.” They were always concerned about awkward expressions and grammar mistakes. Though they strive to write a perfect paper, this desire for perfection sometimes limits their progress. Therefore, the first thing for the teacher to do is to help the students realistically understand the meaning of “academic English writing,” helping them know that whether one is a research beginner or a scholar, it is necessary to understand academic stylistic knowledge first.

Our academic writing instruction was student-centered and teacher-aided. There were also diverse writing methods, such as the process teaching approach mainly used in making a writing plan; the content teaching approach asked for the students to collect literature materials from rich perspectives before the first draft, while the academic literacy approach was adopted in the revision period.

To make the students truly participate in the academic writing process, the teaching target was to conduct a research project in small groups, motivating students to be fully devoted to the group work. With the help of other students, they became familiar with the paper structure, the writing method, and the research process more quickly and smoothly. To be specific, the first step was how to choose an appropriate research topic by following the teacher’s example, addressing their team members’ interest or a current event. The students determined the range of their topic. After that, they assigned specific tasks to each team member. Then the students looked through the related literature as the academic writing norm requested, compared the different methods, collected data, and then organized them. Finally, they drew conclusions from their analysis and wrote the research paper. The students communicated with their teachers and team members in and out of the class, discussing the project together until the final research paper took shape.

When the students were fully involved in the research, they could make deep insights into the writing process, and they could experience the fun of research. They changed the casual topic into a serious research question and a quality research paper. They had gained a sense of accomplishment. Thanks to their effort, each research topic became alive with warmth and emotion. After the final paper was presented to the whole class, they knew that conducting research was not an imaginary task as they thought, rather than it was a scientific process with practical analysis.

By the end of the semester, the students had gained a lot. They finally had lost their fear of academic English writing and conducting research, and they made sense of the research paper writing process. We had successfully met our teaching purpose of “promoting learning by utilizing the knowledge.” This cultivation approach pushed the students to find inspiration from daily life and personal experience and made them think about which question can be a qualified research question. Their question-consciousness would be improved after the semester and thus establish a solid foundation for their later professional research.

While the students played the central role in the academic writing process, the teacher was not just an audience in the classroom; instead, he was an organizer, an inspirer, and a leader. During the academic reading process, he actively helped the students to find the main points and refine key sentence patterns. At the academic writing process, he noted the strengths and weaknesses,

pointed out the problems, and offered solutions. At the same time, the teacher was familiar with every group's research topic, and gave timely feedback. At last, when the whole class finished their presentation, the teacher evaluated it fairly. All this work required the teacher to have a great command of academic research. He must offer detailed instructions on each research paper and give a clear explanation to all the questions. Therefore, it was a demanding teaching task for the teacher.

5. Conclusion

Academic English stresses the organic integration of the postgraduates' research ability, professional knowledge, and language skill, and the three parts should be promoted at the same pace. At the end of the semester, we had a fruitful result in the cultivation of the postgraduates' academic English reading and writing abilities. At first, the students were eager to participate in the research activity. They didn't see themselves as spectators but as researchers at the beginning stage. Furthermore, through the combination of reading with writing, the students successfully mastered the basic research method and adopted a scientific way to conduct research projects beyond writing their personal opinions. Finally, during the revision stage, the students' research ability demonstrated improvement. From the accumulation of the former academic reading, the students learned about the features in a research paper and put all the knowledge into the writing to make the paper more professional and successful. The cultivation of academic English reading and writing for non-English major postgraduates is a continuous process; as instructors we need to make them more competent and confident step by step.

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