



A Study on the Background and Process of Postgraduates' Academic English Learning in China

Yuehong Wei^{1*} and Chungang Miao²

¹*Department of English, North China Electric Power University, Baoding 071003, China.*

²*Department of Politics and Law, North China Electric Power University, Baoding 071003, China.*

Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Author YW designed the study, performed the statistical analysis, wrote the protocol and wrote the first draft of the manuscript. Author CM managed the analyses of the study. Author YW managed the literature searches. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

Article Information

DOI: 10.9734/JESBS/2020/v33i330209

Editor(s):

(1) Dr. Vlasta Hus, University of Maribor, Slovenia.

Reviewers:

(1) Deepti Gupta, Panjab University, India.

(2) Rajib Ahmed Faisal, University of Chittagong, Bangladesh.

(3) Deb Proshad Halder, Jashore Government Women's College, Bangladesh.

Complete Peer review History: <http://www.sdiarticle4.com/review-history/55994>

Received 09 February 2020

Accepted 15 April 2020

Published 22 April 2020

Original Research Article

ABSTRACT

In order to provide reference for postgraduate academic English teaching in China, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive survey in learning background and process before learners go to the graduate school. This study focuses on the academic English course for postgraduates in a key university of China, and the in-depth investigation was carried out from the aspects of students' majors, graduation colleges, English learning foundation, learning attitudes, English learning and especially academic English learning experience, motivation and knowledge of academic English learning. The triangulation combining the quantitative method and qualitative method was used to analyze the research data. The results shows that the English learners have weak academic English foundation but strong English learning motivation and employ single English learning strategy. The learners reported the effective learning methods of academic English from two aspects: basic English learning skills and academic English learning ability. Accordingly, how to develop the teaching model, carry out the teaching process and define the teaching content are discussed in this research.

*Corresponding author: E-mail:wyh231@163.com;

Keywords: Postgraduates; academic English; learning background; learning process.

1. INTRODUCTION

At present, English teaching in China has entered a new era with the rapid improvement of basic English education, the improvement of freshmen's English level year by year, as well as the constant reform and innovation of English teaching in the university stage in order to meet the students' increasing needs for English learning. Hence, English teaching in the postgraduate stage should also be combined with postgraduate's identity and main tasks, and English learning service should be provided for scientific research. Obviously, academic English courses is so necessary for postgraduates in China.

Current academic English research is divided into two stages: one is the academic English course for undergraduates, and the other is the academic English course for postgraduates. However, there is often no obvious boundary and distinction between the two in academic circles. A similar foreign language teaching content is ESP, which serves special purposes. It is a concept different from general English teaching. "An important branch of ESP is academic English (EAP), which aims to provide language support for college students' professional learning and academic activities in English" [1]. Cai [1] also claimed that EAP is divided into general academic English and specialized academic English internationally. The former is to cultivate students' communicative competence in professional learning, such as listening to lectures, taking notes, searching documents, writing papers and participating in international conferences and academics. While the latter focuses on genre awareness and English competence needed in the workplace in specific disciplines (such as medicine, law, engineering, etc). Therefore, it can be seen that academic English is neither professional English nor technical English. In this study, academic English is limited to general academic English, which is always used in general English teaching, while professional teaching is responsible for specialized academic English.

At present, many postgraduate academic English studies mainly focus on academic English writing [2], academic English communicative competence [3], academic English teaching [4], students' critical thinking [5] as well as specific language competence [6], teacher identity [7]

and so on. Through above studies, it was found that academic English is still at a slow stage of development. And there also exists many problems in various aspects ranging from teachers to students, from teaching methods to learning methods, and even from the micro level to the macro level. However, many studies have not conducted a complete survey on the basis, attitude, learning experience, motivation and personal understanding of English from the perspective of postgraduates as a group of learners. Rubin [8] found that excellent foreign language learners have the following characteristics in the process of foreign language learning: they take every opportunity to practice the foreign language, and they are good at guessing the meaning with the context and attach importance to both the language form and the language meaning, and more importantly, monitor the whole practice process [9]. Hence, in order to provide reference for postgraduate academic English teaching in China, it is necessary to conduct a comprehensive survey in learning process and learning strategies. And some scholars have also made many studies on the needs of postgraduates in academic English [10] including learner age, major, English study time, research on English proficiency and English academic level and academic English course evaluation, English study suggestions or opinions, and they finally put forward their own views on academic English teaching. These researches cover a wide range of contents, but do not specify the contents in each aspect. Whereas, a more detailed understanding of learners' learning status which can provide concrete and considerable references for postgraduate students' academic English teaching should be obtained. Besides, the scope of investigation also affects the credibility of the investigation results. And the investigation subjects of this study cover a wide range, including all the postgraduate students majoring in science and engineering and few in social science in the university, which can ensure the reliability of the results.

In order to provide objective and effective practical support in academic English curriculum, teaching content and classroom activities for postgraduates, the in-depth investigation was carried out from the aspects of students' majors, graduation colleges, English learning foundation, learning attitudes, English learning and especially academic English learning experience,

motivation and knowledge of academic English learning. This investigation will provide the evidence for how and what the Chinese postgraduates have learned English from the lower level. Collecting the data, there are some suggestions for what and how the academic English course should be taught in China.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 Research Population

The objects are the first-year postgraduate students of all majors in a key university of China, whose native language is Chinese. The majors include: electric power, power, machinery, computer, environmental engineering, economic management, statistics and humanities. Most of them (80%) major in science and engineering, while a few (20%) study social science, such as management, law, public administration and ideological and political majors. According to the teaching schedule, the learners will study The First Foreign Language in the first semester, in which the listening, speaking, reading and writing focusing on academic English are the main course content.

2.2 Research Instruments

This study adopted the questionnaire survey, which was distributed to students by teachers in class and answered within the specified time. The questionnaire was in the form of anonymous, so as to ensure that learners could objectively reflect their current situation. 800 questionnaires were distributed and 711 valid ones were received. The questionnaire consists of 10 questions about department, major, university, postgraduate English entrance score, English learning attitude, academic English learning experience, English learning experience, academic English learning motivation, correlation between academic English and major, academic English learning difficulties, effective academic English learning methods. Questions 1 and 2 are the type of filling in the blanks, questions 2, 3 and 8 are single choice questions, questions 4-7 and 9 are multiple choice questions, and questions 10 are opening questions, which is to investigate what the subject expect for academic English learning method. The questionnaire was designed by collecting and summarizing materials from students in the form of discussion, and then compiled by combining the strategic factors [8] and learning concept factors [11] that influence successful language learners in this

study. The preparation process can ensure that the content of the survey is consistent with the learning experience of students, and that the wide range of learning experience and learning motivation factors can be investigated wholly.

2.3 Data Collection

The EXCEL table was used to analyze the quantitative data of the questionnaire survey. According to the research dimension classification, the percentage statistics are made for each category. Taking the total number of choices in this dimension as denominator and the number of people for each choice as numerator, the proportion distribution of different choices in each dimension is calculated since some questions have multiple choices. NVivo software was used to analyze the open-ended question data based on Grounded Theory coding the data at three levels. Firstly, answers to the open-ended question were input into the word file in the unit of class. There are 13 files according to the 13 classes for all the subjects. The 13 files were input to the internals in NVivo. Word frequency in Queries was used to code the data (above 50 reference points) as the nodes in first level. 25 nodes are the high frequency words, but there are some frequency words, such as "English", "learning", "English language", "practice", "some", "related", "did", "two", which are the common expression in the answers but don't mean anything to the research topic, were deleted from the list. So there are 17 nodes (as shown in Table 2) in the first coding process. In the second level of coding process, 17 nodes were divided into groups where the nodes share the similar meaning in academic English learning, such as, "reciting", "vocabulary" and "word" in "accumulation of words" group, so 17 nodes were synthesized into 6 parts (as shown in Table 2): "accumulation of words", "skill training", "language expression", "literature reading", "writing training" and "academic field". In the third level of coding process, the nodes in second level are combined into two parts (as shown in Table 2): one is the basic English learning skills and the other is academic English learning ability, which are the main themes in this research.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results of this study reflect the current status of academic English offering in undergraduate colleges, the attitude towards English learning, and the foundation of English learning, English learning strategies, and the problems existing in

the understanding of academic English curriculum. By discussing the findings, this study explores the effective scheme of academic English curriculum offering for postgraduate students.

3.1 Undergraduate Colleges

A total of 171 universities and colleges are studied, among which 6 universities belong to the national key construction universities of "project 211" and "project 985 advantageous discipline innovation platform", and the rest are second or third level universities and colleges in China. In the study on academic English [12], it is pointed out that learners lack of academic English learning experience, but there is no reference to the undergraduate school. It can be seen from the study that the academic English teaching of undergraduate in second and third level colleges and universities is very weak. To some extent, the learner's academic English learning experiences are related to the courses in undergraduate colleges and universities. According to research data, many colleges and universities have set up academic English course modules in college English courses [13,14]. However, there is no clear definition on what kind of learning basis academic English learners should have [15], which leads to the uneven level of academic English teaching contents in the postgraduate stage.

Based on the above results, it can be seen that the great difference in the source of postgraduate students is an important influencing factor of academic English teaching, and the English-related courses offered by different schools are different. Therefore, academic English classes without distinguishing the basic abilities of learners cannot guarantee the learning effect, and also bring difficulties in organizing classroom activities for teachers. Accordingly, the teaching of academic English should be graded according to the entrance exam score. The learners with the low English level can be taught more about the basic English skills and the learners with high English level can be taught more about the academic English knowledge, which is more conducive to the improvement of academic English level for high-level learners and the transition from ordinary English to academic English learning for low-level learners [16].

3.2 Entrance Exam Score

Entrance exam scores are statistically divided into four grades in the survey: A. 80 and above,

B. 70-79, C. 60-69 and D. 60 and below. According to the statistical results (as shown in Table 1), only 1% of the students scored above 80, 6% scored between 70 and 79, 29% scored between 60 and 69, and 33% scored below 60. In addition, 18% of the students did not report their scores. The reasons are as follows: first, they did not want to show their low scores; second, they ignored this question, since this questionnaire does not list the score as the main variable of the survey, even if the question is not answered, it is also considered as a valid questionnaire, and the statistics of other variables are valid; Last, 13% of the students were allowed to get the admission to graduate without taking the entrance examination due to their excellence performance academically at school. However, since these students can get the exemption from the examination, they must have got high scores. Based on the above situation, only 20% of the students have a score of 70 or above, while about 50% of the students have a score of 60 or below. In other words, the English proficiency of postgraduates is generally at the low level, as shown in Table 2, the "vocabulary" and "expression" are the high frequency words with reference point at 424 in sum, which is also an important factor in the setting of academic English courses and also a factor affecting the effect of academic English teaching. Because the premise of academic English learning is that students should have a solid foundation of general English, and the difficulties in academic English should be more than those in general English. The postgraduates in low English level are a major concern when the academic English courses in some universities in China were set. In academic English courses, the basic language teaching content of general English should be appropriately added. Starting from the micro-teaching, with the improvement of learners' language ability, the academic text learning with genres should be carried out to meet the needs which the subjects in higher level have.

3.3 English Learning Attitude

English learning attitudes were set into five choices: A. like very much, B. like, C. indifferent, D. dislike, E. dislike very much. According to the data (as shown in the Table 1), 17% of students like English very much, 57% like English, 15% are indifferent, 9% don't like it, and 2% don't like it very much. From the perspective of this variable, the majority of students like learning

English very much. Compared with the statistical results of the previous entry score variable, it can be seen that there is not a positive relationship between learning attitude and learning performance.

In other words, some students may show poor performance, but they still want to learn English well, and their learning attitude is positive. This result is a positive factor for the setting of academic English courses for postgraduates, and learners' learning attitude will also affect the learning effect, which will in turn promote the teaching effect. Academic English teaching should be carried out depending on the level which the learners are and learners' learning acceptance ability, so as to avoid causing learning anxiety. Therefore, ability-based teaching or mixed teaching mode can be a reasonable way to stimulate learners' enthusiasm.

3.4 English Learning Strategies

This section contains two variables: academic English learning experience and general English learning experience. The purpose of this part is to investigate students' pre-learning strategies, and to understand students' learning experience from the perspectives of general English and academic English, so as to provide reference for the setting of academic English curriculum for postgraduate students.

Options of academic English learning experience are listed as follows: A. almost no academic English knowledge but have read a few papers when finish undergraduate graduation thesis (design) without systematic learning, B. had experience of translating academic literature, and understand the characteristics of academic English, C. attended some lectures of academic English and have read some English papers, D. have read some professional English books, E. had academic exchanges abroad, F. nothing. According to the data results (as shown in the Table 1), 60% of the students have only read some literatures related to academic English when finishing undergraduate graduation thesis, but its quantity is limited. 13% of the students had experience in translating academic literature and understood the characteristics of academic English. Only 15% of the students said that they had participated in English academic lectures and read some English papers. This part of the students must have a foundation of academic English. At the same time, 10% of the students

have read professional English books, and this experience should be related to the professional English courses at the undergraduate stage. Although it is academic to some extent, it cannot be understood as academic English learning to some extent. 2% of the students have the experience of going abroad for academic exchange. No students reported that they had never been exposed to academic English knowledge. It can be seen from the above data that learners lack basic professional academic training and their academic cognitive ability is weak. As shown in Table 2, "professional field" and "specialized vocabulary" are the high frequency words, which show learners need to develop the knowledge in their own academic field. The premise of academic English learning is that learners should have basic academic knowledge. In order to solve this problem, teachers should provide academic knowledge framework for students in the teaching process, and strengthen the cultivation of academic thinking for students training them to read professional papers and listen to English lecture recordings.

General English learning experience options are listed below: A. Have taken part in extracurricular English classes in elementary and middle school; B. Study for exams in high school and college; C. Memorize vocabulary for the postgraduate entrance examination; D. Often listen to English radio; E. Watch American TV series and English movies; F. Prepare for the GRE, TOFLE, IELTS and other foreign language test. The data results show that (as shown in Table 1), 12% of the learners said that they once attended English extracurricular interest class in primary and secondary schools. 32% of the learners' reported they learned English for exams in high schools and universities. 26% reported that their English learning for the postgraduate entrance examination is mainly about memorizing words and doing questions. Only 4% of the students often listen to English radio. 24% of the learners reported they watch American TV series and films to learn English. Only 1% of the students have prepared for GRE, TOFLE, IELTS, etc. The result reflects a common problem among most English learners in China, that is, exam-oriented English learning is the mainstream, which is undoubtedly a hindrance to the teaching of academic English, because academic English emphasizes application rather than examination [1]. It requires English teachers to actively guide students to expand their English reading, increase the actual use of language in classroom,

such as rewriting exercises, cloze text, and so on. As shown in Table 2, "sentence expression" and "writing training" are the high frequency words, which shows learners need to develop their basic English learning input and output and "accumulating vocabulary" is also a high frequency word which is obviously the basic English learning skills. But if learners can make good use of the advantage of memorizing words to accumulate academic English vocabulary, and analyze the usage of vocabulary from the perspective of semantics, combining the meaning of vocabulary with professional knowledge to expand the semantic range of vocabulary understanding. Academic English is not limited to reading and writing, but learners generally have a low level of listening and speaking and lack of intensive practice. Therefore, in this stage, the skills, like academic listening and speaking, should be attached more importance to and combined with other language learning skills, such as, academic reading and writing.

3.5 Academic English Learning Motivation

The questionnaire of the learning motivation mainly includes: just because this course is a compulsory course, it is required to complete the supervisor's scientific research tasks, publish high-level academic papers, participate in international academic exchanges, to improve English listening, speaking, reading and writing, and prepare for further study abroad. The trend of the data results (as shown in Table 1) indicates that most of the students learning motivation is to finish a required course, complete supervisor's scientific research task, and take part in the international academic exchanges, respectively 26%, 24%, 26%. 17% of the students have the need to publish a high-level academic paper. 6% and 1% of students want to improve their listening, speaking, reading and writing and go abroad for further study. With increase of the research tasks of graduate supervisors and the trend of internationalization of knowledge, the application of academic English has attracted more and more attention. As shown in Table 2, the nodes of the third level with the highest reference points (academic field, 840) show that learners have high motivation to improve their own research by learning academic English. It also further illustrates the necessity of academic English courses for postgraduates.

3.6 Understanding of Academic English Course

This part is to investigate the students' understanding of academic English from the perspective of its relationship with professional courses and the difficulties in academic English. The results of the survey (as shown in the Table 1) show that 18% of the students thought they were irrelevant, and 82% thought that although the content of the class is general academic English, it could serve as a reference for the academic development of the major. As the academic English is a public foreign language course, and the students in the class have different subject backgrounds, so the English teachers are unable to cover the professional academic English content of each major, which is also a common problem in the academic English teaching. However, academic English includes general academic English and professional academic English. General academic English includes basic ideas of paper writing, language expression methods, discourse framework and basic grammar problems, which can build basic knowledge structure of academic English for learners. Therefore, general academic English can be the main content of postgraduate academic English.

The survey of difficulties in learning academic English for postgraduate students includes the following options: A. professional vocabulary; B. syntactic structure; C. academic paper reading; D. practical writing process; E. on-site oral expression of academic reports; F. differences between Chinese and western thinking in language expression. 25% of the learners thought paper writing is the most difficult part (as shown in Table 2, "writing" and "writing training", 285). 17% and 18% of the learners thought that the oral expression in academic report and the differences of expression between Chinese and English are the difficult parts ("expression" and "language structure", 129). 15% and 14% of learners reported they had difficulties in memorizing professional vocabulary and reading academic papers ("recite", "words" and "vocabulary", 295). 11% of learners thought syntactic structure is a difficult problem ("expression" and "language structure", 129).

The traditional general English teaching is mainly about grammar learning. As a result, most postgraduate students have solid grammar

Table 1. The learning background and experience survey results

Options	A	B	C	D	E	F
Entrance exam score	1%	6%	29%	33%	18%	13%
Learning attitude	17%	57%	15%	9%	2%	0%
Learning experience	60%	13%	15%	10%	2%	0%
Learning process	12%	32%	26%	4%	24%	2%
Learning motivation	26%	24%	17%	26%	6%	1%
The relation between GE and EAP	18%	82%				
Difficulties in learning	15%	11%	14%	25%	17%	18%

Table 2. The reference points of the nodes on the effective academic English learning methods

Nodes of the first level	Nodes of the second level	Nodes of the third level	Reference points
Recite, words, vocabulary	accumulation of words	Basic English	295
Reading, looking, listening, reading	skill training	learning skills	689
Expression, language structure	language expression		129
Write, writing exercise	writing training	Academic	285
literature	literature reading	English ability	184
Paper, thesis, academic, study, professional	academic field		840

knowledge, in other words, they are familiar with the concept of grammar knowledge. Therefore, many learners believe that there is no difficulties in academic English learning. In fact, grammar problems still hinder some learners from making clear expression in academic writing [17]. The essay writing process is considered to be a difficult point in academic English, and the results are consistent with the learner's academic English learning experience (as shown in Table 1). As learners lack basic academic training, both Chinese and English academic writing are their weaknesses. Therefore, the basic elements in academic thesis writing process, such as the framework of academic papers, the content of each part, the main points and the way of development of writing, should be added to the academic English courses. What's more, academic English teaching content should not only be limited to paper writing, but also includes oral academic reports. As a result of the current status that Chinese students always have poor listening and speaking ability, adding listening and speaking content into academic English teaching is also an important part of improving academic English courses. Problems such as unclear academic expression, difficulties in selecting words, and reading academic papers arise from the unfamiliarity of students' academic English linguistic features, lead to the emergence of pragmatic phenomena such as cohesion, collocation, and concise meaning. Adequate

language input can help resolve this problem, such as "academic literature reading", which is also the way in which learners can accumulate the academic vocabulary. In view of this, much attention must be paid in academic English teaching to the teaching of language quality improvement, as well as the design and tracking guidance from the micro level.

4. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

By employing questionnaire, this study investigated the postgraduate academic requirements as well as the existing problems in academic English learning. The results showed that the English learners have weak academic English foundation but strong English learning motivation, single English learning strategies and the learners reported the effective learning methods of academic English from two aspects: basic English learning skills and academic English learning ability. Accordingly, in the transition from general English to academic English, it is necessary to strengthen the teaching of basic language ability, the basic knowledge of thesis writing, the skills of thesis argumentation and the teaching content with professional stylistic features. In addition, through this study, the following enlightenment to the teaching method is also obtained.

4.1 Enlightenment to the Comprehensive Teaching Model

The genre-based and research-driven teaching model can be used in the case of ability-based postgraduate academic English teaching because students in this group can directly access to the academic English which needs the higher level of English knowledge. As Tao [18] pointed out that postgraduate should be divided into different levels according to their English ability. If there are students from different majors, the teaching model can adopt the content-based teaching method, which has certain challenges for the English teacher's knowledge structure, but can meet the requirements for the students from different majors. What's more, if the postgraduate academic English adopts ability-based classes, a higher level of postgraduate learners can adopt a mixed teaching model combining content and genre.

4.2 Enlightenment to the Teaching Content

Some scholars believe that the lack of academic English learning ability in non-native English is reflected in two aspects: grammatical accuracy and pragmatic appropriateness [17]. Selecting general English materials to learn the basic language skills and grammar knowledge, and academic language materials related to majors to analyze textual function, expression habits, writing strategies as well as argumentation methods, the teachers in academic English teaching can train the learners express their ideas in their academic paper correctly and fluently to meet the requirement of academic learning.

4.3 Enlightenment to the Teaching Process

Academic English learning has higher requirements for teachers and also higher challenges for learners. As a consequence, compared with general English teaching, academic English teaching should pay more attention to the teaching process from easy to difficult level in order to form a step-by-step gradual process, which begins from the basic grammar and knowledge in academic writing to the specific research project teaching with the participation of the professional tutors. Academic English Teaching can be a bridge from language learning to the language expression of academic idea. Moreover, to combine language learning

with practical application, and stimulate students' learning motivation and self-confidence, we should not discuss it theoretically but put it into practice.

CONSENT

As per international standard or university standard, students' written consent has been collected and preserved by the author(s).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is supported by the Fundamental Research Funds for the Central Universities (#2019MS14) and Social Science Development Project (#201803050215).

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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Peer-review history:

*The peer review history for this paper can be accessed here:
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