

# On CR Teaching Approach to Elevate Postgraduate Students' EAP Writing Level: Based on the Course of "Academic English" in Chinese Universities

Yaohan Guo, Liping Wei

School of Foreign Languages, Jiangxi University of Finance and Economics, Nanchang, China  
Email: guoyaoh@mail3.sysu.edu.cn

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## Abstract

Owing to the importance of postgraduate students' EAP writing levels in global academic activities, and students' poor consciousness of differences between Chinese and English resulting in Chinese postgraduate students' poor EAP writing performance, the current research manages to design a CR approach to elevate students' consciousness of differences between the two languages, adopting quantitative and qualitative approaches, so as to improve their EAP writing ability. The research can serve as a guide for CR teaching and research in academic English classes.

## Keywords

CR, EAP Writing, Academic English

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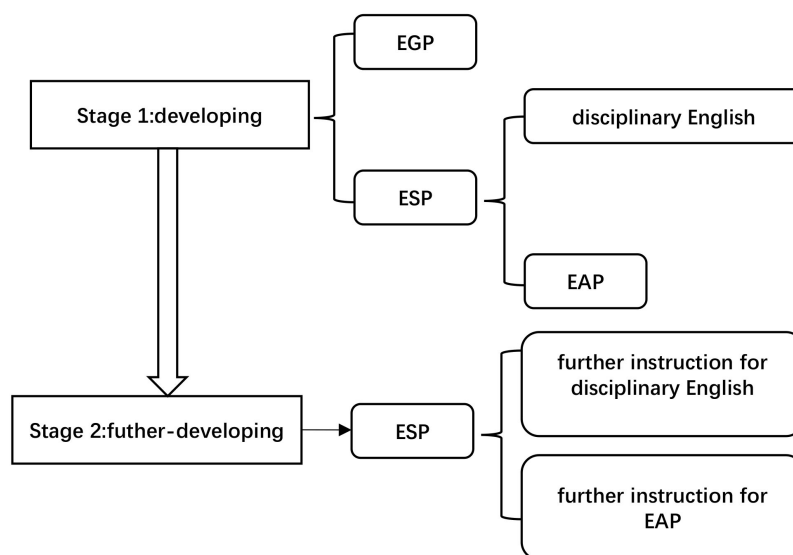
## 1. Introduction

*China's National Outline for Mid- and Long-Term Educational Reform and Development* (2010-2020) emphasizes the importance to cultivate Chinese university graduates to be talents with international insights and good knowledge of international regulations, and competitive to participate in international affairs and competitions. The recent layout to construct "double first-class" universities has placed more attention to the international competitive power of Chinese university graduates (Zuo & Ning, 2019: p. 73). English for Academic Purposes (hereafter EAP), as an English variant "for academic researchers to build academic framework, communicate academic information and disseminate academic knowledge" (Wei, 2016: pp. 267-277), so as to promote academic develop-

ment, is with no doubt a must for today's university students. In fact, catering to the national educational development strategy, EAP instruction has aroused Chinese scholars' attention, and has already served as an indispensable part in college English and postgraduate English curriculum (Cai, 2014; Wen, 2014).

*English Syllabus for Non-English-Major Postgraduate Students in China* (2020) has divided the whole process of postgraduate English teaching into two stages: developing and further-developing (see **Figure 1**). English for General Purposes (EGP) and English for Specific Purposes (ESP) are included in the developing stage. EGP is utilized to strengthen students' English ability in listening, speaking, reading, writing, etc., serving as a transition course for students to be prepared for more advanced English studies. ESP consists of disciplinary English and EAP. Disciplinary English, usually delivered by teachers with an educational background of the same discipline (as the students being taught), tends to teach vocabulary and expressions specific to certain discipline; while EAP is normally linguistic education from the angle of linguistic analysis, managing to satisfy postgraduates' needs to participate in academic activities. EAP is normally taught by teachers with educational background of foreign languages (Wang, 2022). For the further-developing stage, EAP is taught more deeply (Zhao & Chu, 2023). As an important part of EAP, EAP writing hasn't been grasped thoroughly for Chinese postgraduate students according to some scholar's research (Wang, 2018).

Owing to the importance of EAP in English teaching for postgraduate students, and the incompetency of postgraduate students' EAP writing ability, the current research manages to follow CR approach to design the writing part of the course "Academic English", to investigate efficient ways to elevate postgraduate students' EAP writing level.



**Figure 1.** Stages of English teaching for postgraduate students (EGP stands for English for General Purposes; ESP stands for English for Specific Purposes; EAP stands for English for Academic Purposes).

The researcher here has noticed in previous teaching practice that the main problem lying in postgraduate students' EAP writing is neither grammatical mistakes nor inappropriate writing patterns, but in language itself. One common procedure for Chinese postgraduate students in writing academic English papers is to produce a draft in Chinese first, then to translate this draft with the help of translation tools. This procedure can to a large extent lessen grammatical mistakes; however, a lot of Chinglish expressions appear during this procedure. To make things worse, unconscious of the linguistic difference between Chinese and English, students often fail to identify such Chinglish expressions. Academic papers produced this way are often awkward thus incompetent naturally. To improve students' academic writing ability, the researcher here thinks it necessary to raise their consciousness of difference between English and Chinese in EAP teaching.

As a teaching approach, consciousness raising (hereafter CR) was put forward by Sharwood-Smith (1981), referring to series of teaching activities aiming to raise students' awareness of certain linguistic features. Typical CR activities designed by Ellis (1991), Willis and Willis (2007) consist of learners self-studying and identifying certain linguistic feature, teacher investigating learners' learning closely and instructing them accordingly to strengthen their impression of the feature, learners' consciousness elevated consequently. Most researchers hold optimistic view toward CR's effect on language teaching.

## 2. Literature Review

This section aims at summarizing previous relevant studies and points out the research gap.

### 2.1. Previous Relative Studies in China

Chinese scholars have noticed language consciousness from 1990s. Pang (1996) stated the connotation of language consciousness, analyzed application of CR approach in English language teaching and emphasized the value of this application in English language teaching. Ding (1996) investigated in length into the theoretical basis of CR approach and its value in college English education, especially in college English writing courses. Peng (1999) explored applying CR approach to analyze grammar, to lead students to discover, understand and utilize different grammatical forms, and to promote the development of students' linguistic abilities. Hu (2009) suggested that task-based CR activities can help students discover linguistic forms themselves, summarize grammatical rules themselves, form their own grammatical abilities, thus serving as an effective approach to promote language understanding and outputs. Researches concerning application of CR approach in EAP education for postgraduate students are not common except Su (2021), who believes CR approach raises postgraduates' consciousness of features for different language variants. Through scaffolding exercises, this consciousness can transfer into practical language-use ability, to help

students to produce good papers with EAP features.

## 2.2. Previous Relative Studies from Other Countries

As to the importance of CR in language teaching, Carter (2003) stated the importance of cultivating linguistic consciousness in language teaching activities. The application of CR approach can help students distinguish the difference of language variants, build correct consciousness of those variants, and then to avoid incorrect language use and optimize language teaching effect (Ellis, 1994: p. 643; Carter, 2003). As to the procedure of applying CR approach to language teaching activities, Mohamed (2004), Svalberg (2005, 2012) probed into the ways to raise students' attention of language variants when applying CR approach. Barron (2003) investigated into language teaching activity design. He suggested collaborative study and pointed out the dos and don'ts for this kind of study. As to the output exercise, both Mohamed (2004) and Svalberg (2005) insisted that only through skill-training output exercises can CR approach seize notable outcome. Svalberg (2009) puts forward the assessment standard of CR approach. Similar to China, application of CR approach in EAP education for postgraduate students are not common in other countries.

## 2.3. Limitations of Previous Studies

Judging from literature review above for CR approach in English teaching, it can be seen that in China, CR approach utilized in English grammar teaching has been emphasized. Application of CR approach in English teaching has also covered other fields such as: the importance of CR approach in English teaching, teaching objective, design, output test of the approach, etc. Utilization of CR approach in EAP teaching for postgraduate students has been limited.

Since consciousness-raising of differences between Chinese and English is vital for Chinese postgraduate students in enhancing their EAP writing ability, the current study emphasizes on how to raise Chinese postgraduate students' consciousness of differences between Chinese and English through CR approach based on "Academic English", a compulsory course for Chinese postgraduate students. The researcher puts forward a teaching plan here, hoping to provide a possible attempt to elevate Chinese postgraduate students' EAP writing abilities through raising their consciousness of differences between Chinese and English, which in a long run serves the objective of optimizing the cultivation of postgraduate students.

## 3. Course Design to Elevate EAP Writing Abilities of Chinese Postgraduate Students

A majority of Chinese universities open "Academic English" for the first-grade postgraduate students. The university where the current study is carried out set up both "Academic English: Listening and Speaking" and "Academic English: Reading and Writing" for the first-grade postgraduate students, each course oc-

cupying one semester. Since the current research emphasizes on the elevation of students' EAP writing skills, the course will be designed within the time expansion of one semester.

To show the course design clearly, the researcher first introduces the research content, then explains the research procedure, and manifests the research methodology at the end.

### 3.1. Research Content

The current research mainly consists of the following aspects:

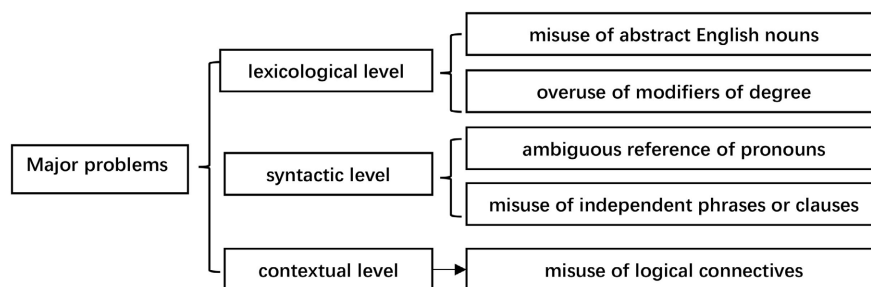
1) Figuring out major problems in postgraduate students' EAP writing. Pinkham (2000) has summarized problems often found in Chinese writers' and translators' works. Based on these problems, together with the researcher's pilot investigation, 5 major problems falling into 3 categories (lexicology, syntax and context) can be found in Chinese postgraduate students' EAP writing. They are as follows (also see **Figure 2**).

a. Misuse of abstract English nouns. English language tends to use abstract expressions, while Chinese language tends to use concrete ones. For example, "examination" can be translated into "检查工作" in Chinese. It can be seen that an abstract noun has been translated into a concrete activity. In reverse, when translating Chinese phrases like "检查工作" into English, many students tend to put it into "work of examination". These "A of B" patterns are quite normal in students' writing to refer to something which can be expressed by one single abstract English noun.

b. Overuse of modifiers of degree. There are abundant modifiers of degree in written Chinese, such as "切实地", "有效地", "相对来说", "相比之下", "稍微" and "相当", etc. Chinese postgraduate students tend to bring this Chinese writing habit into English writing and use "actually", "effectively", "relatively", "comparatively", "a little" and "rather", etc., accordingly, which doesn't conform to English writing habit. Overuse of modifiers of degree weakens, instead of strengthening what the head word wants to convey. In EAP writing, this kind of overuse should be abandoned.

c. Ambiguous reference of pronouns. As a hypotactic language, English has strict grammar; whereas as a paratactic language, Chinese places emphasis on implicit connection between words and phrases. As to the use of pronouns, English pronouns should refer to nouns or phrases that have already appeared in previous contexts. The two cannot be far from each other and should be consistent in person and number. However, there are not such rules for pronouns in Chinese. In Chinese students' English EAP writing, negative transfer occurs in that they often produce sentences with pronouns of ambiguous reference.

d. Misuse of independent phrases or clauses. In English, agents of either gerunds or infinitives should be consistent with the subjects of the main clause. There isn't such rule in Chinese language. Influenced by the writing habit of Chinese language, many Chinese English learners often make mistakes in using independent phrases or clauses.



**Figure 2.** Major problems existing in postgraduate students' EAP writing.

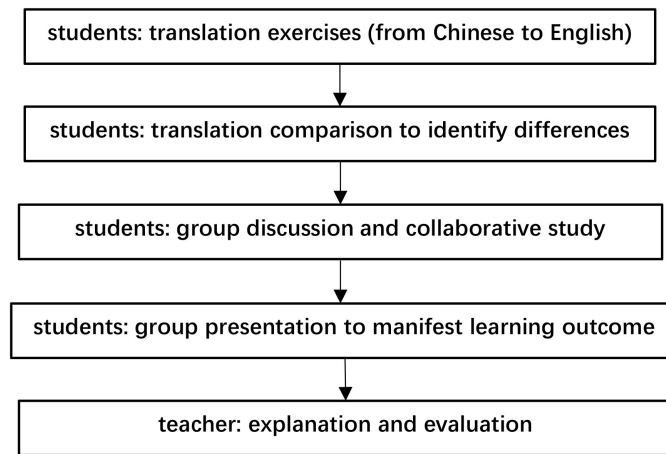
e. Misuse of logical connectives. Logic is vital for academic papers, which makes logical connectives abundant in such writings. Moreover, English, as a hypotactic language, needs logical connectives to maintain the logical relationship among sentences and passages. Chinese is different from English in this aspect in that implicit relations are quite common without logical connectives. Influenced by this Chinese linguistic feature, Chinese English learners are not good at using logical connectives properly.

At the beginning of the research, the researcher invites students to write an essay entitled "One Key Problem in My Discipline". Making use of corpus software tagging and manual tagging, the researcher tags the mistakes students have made to obtain an all-rounded knowledge of the problems students have in EAP writing, and to lay foundation for the follow-up CR teaching.

2) Designing and implementing of CR teaching. After finding the above problems, the researcher adopts CR approach to solve them one by one. The researcher first selects abstracts from top journals in China, then design Chinese-to-English translation exercises for students to do. After finishing these exercises, the students are invited to compare their version with the preferred version (normally the English abstract provided by those journals), and to identify the correspondent differences between Chinese and English. Students are then divided into groups to discuss and present their outcomes in groups. Every group presentation will receive suggestions from other groups for further development. In the end, the researcher makes supplementary explanation toward correspondent linguistic differences. See **Figure 3**.

Of the 5 major problems concerning postgraduate students' consciousness of the differences between Chinese and English, the researcher would implement CR teaching based on the pilot study from more severe problem to less severe ones. For the commonest-seen problem, the researcher would spend more time to explain and add students' self-study time, aiming at strengthening students' consciousness of the difference lying in the problem.

3) Assessment and promotion of CR teaching. At the end of CR teaching, students are required to write an academic paper with the same title as that of the beginning. The researcher would tag again the mistakes students have made. Afterwards, the researcher would utilize SPSS to compare students' two performances, to assess the promotion of their EAP abilities. The assessing **Table 1** is manifested as follows.



**Figure 3.** CR teaching approach to elevate postgraduate students' EAP writing ability.

**Table 1.** Comparison of students' consciousness of differences between Chinese and English before and after CR teaching.

Index	premeasured mean	postmeasured mean	<i>F</i>	<i>p</i>	$\eta^2$
<i>misuse of abstract English nouns</i>					
<i>overuse of modifiers of degree</i>					
<i>ambiguous reference of pronouns</i>					
<i>misuse of independent phrases or clauses</i>					
<i>misuse of logical connectives</i>					

Getting the data of the comparison, the researcher invites students to write reflection journals on two perspectives. One is about the major differences between Chinese and English; the other is about CR approach's impact on their EAP writing. Afterwards, the researcher extracts, classifies and summarizes key themes from the reflection journal using the research method of theme analysis.

Synthesizing the comparative assessment and theme analysis, the researcher assesses the teaching effect of CR approach, and forms follow-up teaching suggestions for EAP writing instruction.

### 3.2. Research Procedure

In order to show the whole research explicitly, the research procedure is provided here based on the research content manifested above.

1) Teaching preparation. The researcher grasps major problems existing in postgraduate students' EAP writing. Students are required to write an academic paper entitled "One Key Problem in My Discipline". This title is in accordance with EAP writing requirements. Moreover, students discussing their familiar topic can help to reflect their EAP writing ability.

The researcher collects students' papers, and tags the problems in students' papers at lexicological, syntactic and contextual levels, using AntConc and ma-

nual methods. A quantitative analysis can be formed as to students' consciousness of difference between Chinese and English.

2) Teaching process. With the help of Ellis's (1991), Willis and Willis' (2007) procedure design for CR teaching, the researcher designs teaching procedure to elevate students' consciousness from the 5 aspects talked in 3.1. Every aspect follows similar procedure, including teaching activities like self-study, divergent thinking, collaborative study, group presentation, etc. (for details, please see **Figure 3**).

In order to explain CR teaching approach more clearly, the researcher here takes one problem: "misuse of abstract nouns", as an example to explain in detail.

First, students finish Chinese-to-English translation exercises. The researcher selects one abstract together with its English version from top journals in China to draw students' attention to the translation of "A of B". Moreover, the researcher prepares a group of Chinese sentences containing phrases like "……工作", "……活动", etc., for students to translate into English.

Second, students compare the translation for reference with theirs and think about differences between the two. After students finish the translation exercises, the teacher hands out the translation for reference to the students and leads students to compare the two translated versions.

Third, students conduct collaborative study and figure out the differences between students' translated version and translation for reference. The researcher divides students into groups randomly. Students are expected to discuss and identify "……工作" should not be translated into "the work of...".

Fourth, groups manifest their discussion outcome and are supposed to elevate their output quality. The researcher not only asks students to present their discussion outcome, but also invites them to carry out peer evaluation.

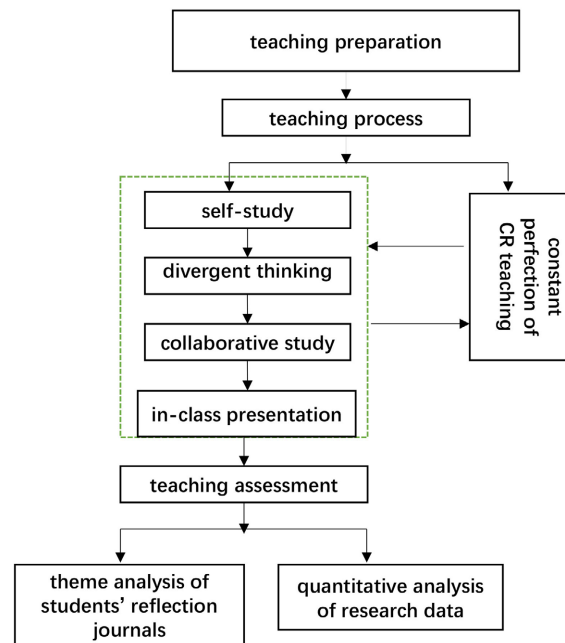
Fifth, the researcher makes comments on students' presentation to strengthen their understanding of this linguistic difference between Chinese and English. The researcher emphasizes again "the work of..." as a Chinglish expression doesn't accord with English way of writing and designs another similar translation exercise for students to do to grasp thoroughly this language point.

3) Teaching output. At the end of the research, students are required to write an academic paper on the same topic as that at the beginning. The researcher conducts repeated analysis of variance with SPSS, to compare how students' consciousness of differences between Chinese and English change before and after CR teaching, emphasizing on whether students improve at lexicological, syntactic and contextual levels.

Meanwhile, students are required to write reflection journals on major differences between Chinese and English, and the impact of CR teaching on students' EAP writing. Afterwards, the researcher withdraws key themes from those journals utilizing theme analysis, to form suggestions for future teaching and research of EAP writing course.

The research process is manifested as **Figure 4**.





**Figure 4.** Teaching process adopting CR approach.

### 3.3. Research Methodology

This research is an empirical study combining quantitative and qualitative methods:

1) Comparative analysis. The method of comparison penetrates from the beginning to the end of this program. One is longitudinal comparison. Students' EAP writings at the beginning and end of the study are compared at lexicological, syntactic and contextual levels, to assess the effect of CR teaching on raising students' consciousness of differences between Chinese and English, thus to elevate postgraduate students' EAP writing levels; the other is horizontal comparison. During the implementation of CR teaching, students are required to compare their translation with the translation for reference when they are doing self-study. Students are required to do peer evaluation based on their discussion results when they are doing collaborative study. These two horizontal comparisons are used to help students to identify correspondent linguistic differences between Chinese and English, to know thoroughly the differences and utilize what they learn in their EAP writing practice.

2) Statistical analysis. The statistical analysis consists of two steps: first is to do statistical analysis toward students' essays at the beginning and end of the research; second is to do repeated variance analysis.

Through corpus tool and manual tagging, the researcher collects students' problems concerning their consciousness of differences between Chinese and English on lexicological, syntactical and contextual levels, and forms quantitative analysis report. To be specific, for problems of misuse of English abstract nouns, overuse of modifiers of degree, and ambiguous reference of pronouns, the researcher tags them and counts their number using AntConc; for problems of

misuse of independent phrases or clauses and logical connectives which are beyond lexicological level, it is hard to tag them using corpus tools. Therefore, the researcher uses manual methods to count the number of these two problems.

Based on the above analysis results, the researcher carries out repeated variance analysis with SPSS, to compare students' consciousness of difference between Chinese and English at the beginning with that at the end of the research, to see whether students' consciousness have been raised after CR teaching on lexicological, syntactical and contextual levels, thus to evaluate the impact of CR teaching in elevating postgraduate students' EAP writing abilities.

3) Textual analysis. Students are required to write reflection journals on linguistic differences between Chinese and English and effect of CR teaching to elevate their EAP writing levels. After students hand in the reflection journals, the researcher will distract key themes from the journals to do qualitative textual analysis. The themes will then be classified and summarized to be used in follow-up teaching and research.

#### 4. Conclusion

The elevation of postgraduate students' EAP writing abilities can promote their participation in international academic activities, which serves the mid- and long-term cultivation of postgraduate education. This research designs CR teaching approach to promote postgraduate students' EAP writing abilities, which provides a new idea to cultivate these students' academic capabilities. The research paradigm can serve as a pilot research for follow-up similar large-scale quantitative research. The quantitative method used in the current research is beneficial for research methodology design of other similar studies. Meanwhile, the research data got in this program can be used in future teaching and research of the course "Academic English", to elevate the effect of this course.

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#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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