An Exploratory Reform in Separation of Teaching and Examination for Postgraduate Academic English Course Based on POA

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Abstract

Based on the survey of academic English abilities and learning needs of non-English major postgraduates at Inner Mongolia University, China. The study explores the curriculum reform scheme of general academic English for postgraduates under the guidance of Production-oriented Approach, and carries out the separation reform in teaching and examination of postgraduate academic English. The teaching concept of "promoting learning with pragmatic purpose" in Production-oriented Approach (POA) is applied to the teaching of graduate students' academic English writing. Combined with computer technology and related products developed by Beijing Tianyan Rongzhi Software Co., Ltd., a number of open question banks conforming to POA summative evaluation are constructed, and the POA teaching evaluation model is applied to the summative assessment of the course. The results indicate that the new teaching model based on POA realizes the transformation of students from merely learning English to pragmatically using English. The academic writing task assigned by the teacher promotes postgraduates to earnestly apply what they have learned in class to practice, which is of great help to their writing academic abstracts and research papers in English, and greatly enhances their confidence in reading English literature and publishing English academic papers independently. The curriculum assessment adopting separation between teaching and examination enables students to show more initiative to expand their academic knowledge and their English thinking while learning the classroom content, so that the cases of getting high scores via a frantic last-minute effort will be apparently reduced, and the assessment for their achievements in the course will become more efficient and fair.

Keywords

Examination, Pragmatic Purpose

1. Introduction

The construction of world-class universities and first-class disciplines was officially implemented by the Ministry of Education of China in 2017. Under the background of vigorously promoting the construction of world-class universities and first-class disciplines in China, higher requirements are put forward for graduate English teaching. The double first-class construction means that China's future talents in scientific and technological fields must integrate themselves into the international academic circle and have the international voice in their own discipline (Cai, 2018). Good academic English writing ability will play a key part in China's graduate students' international academic communication. It is the basic premise and important guarantee for postgraduate students to sufficiently exhibit their research achievements and to successfully fit into the field of international academic.

Academic English abilities and learning needs of non-English major postgraduates enrolled in 2014 and 2015 at Inner Mongolia University in 2014 and 2015 were surveyed in the form of questionnaire and interview. The results show that 96.5% of postgraduate students have not received systematic academic English training before entering the university; 98% of graduate students' academic writing experience stopped at the level of undergraduate thesis writing. Above 85% of the students believe that the biggest difficulty in their graduate English learning lies in their lack of understanding of the writing norms and discourse characteristics of English academic papers. At the same time, academic English needs of those non-English major postgraduates were also surveyed. 96.33% of the postgraduates need to read English literature and materials; 83.49% of graduate students hope to write English academic papers; 63.3% expect to write emails in English to communicate with scholars in their fields, and even to attend international conferences overseas (Wu, Guo, & Wei, 2020). The results show that graduate students have an urgent need to receive systematic guidance and training in reading and writing academic papers. Therefore, the cultivation of postgraduates' abilities in academic English literacy should become an important goal for postgraduates' English teaching and learning at our university.

Over the last few years, the research on graduate English teaching under the background of the construction of "double first-class" has attracted more and more attention. Zhao Xueqin investigated and analyzed the current situation of English needs of non-English major postgraduates under the background of "double first-class" construction (Zhao, 2017). Pan Chongkun and Yang Hong put forward some suggestions on strengthening the academic English writing ability of non-English major postgraduates under the background of "double first-class" (Pan & Yang, 2019). Chun Liu and Guo Yueqin conducted a series of

postgraduate academic English teaching reforms and explorations carried out by China University of Petroleum (East China) under the guidance of POA (Chun & Yang, 2021). Based on Production-oriented Approach, Sun Yuchao explored and constructed the "Trinity" writing teaching model of graduate academic English, and tested the effectiveness of the teaching model through a 9-week teaching experiment (Sun, 2021).

It can be seen that the importance of graduate academic English has been widely recognized, and the specific teaching contents and methods have also been widely studied. However, there is relatively little research on the specific model and practical effectiveness of postgraduate academic English teaching based on learning output and the reform in separation between teaching and examination in graduate public English based on POA. Based on the survey of general academic English ability and learning needs of non-English major postgraduates at Inner Mongolia University, this study puts forward the curriculum reform scheme of general academic English for postgraduates under the guidance of POA, and carries out the separation reform in teaching and examination. The expected learning results of graduate students are set in advance, which can be emphasized as the driving force of their learning. Teaching activities and evaluation criteria are subsequently designed in reverse, which strives to promote students' learning with pragmatic purpose. In this way, graduate students' practical English ability is cultivated, and the needs of students' professional development and international talent training are met.

2. Practice of Separation between Teaching and Examination Based on POA

POA is an educational theory, constructed by Wen Qiufang of Beijing Foreign Studies University on the basis of foreign theoretical research achievements such as Krashen's "Input Hypothesis" and Swain's "output hypothesis". POA is an educational theory that fits the reality of foreign language education in China and has an international perspective. This theory aims to activate the classroom, promote practice and solve the problems of "text first" and "separation between learning and application" faced by foreign language teaching in colleges and universities in China (Wen, 2017a). POA opens up a new path for promoting the innovation and development of foreign language education and improving the quality and level of foreign language teaching in China (Sun, 2021).

The traditional examination method is merely based on textbooks and examines students' mechanical memory. The contents of an examination paper are relatively limited, which cannot effectively promote students to improve their comprehensive English ability. The positive role of the separation of teaching and examination in teaching practice is very obvious, which is particularly reflected in the following two aspects: 1) it enables students to actively expand their knowledge while learning well the classroom content, and there will be no more cases in which they can get high scores by making a frantic last-minute ef-

fort. Therefore, students need to take the initiative to learn more extracurricular content after class to improve their comprehensive English ability; 2) the separation between teaching and examination requires teachers not only to teach well the classroom content, but also to delve into the content of teaching materials and widen their horizon which affirmatively promotes the teacher to change teaching methods and improve teaching quality so as to improve their teaching level.

The research and practice of POA mainly focused on English majors, College English and other undergraduate teaching fields, the research on the combination of POA with academic English writing teaching within the scope of graduate English teaching is relatively rare, which is worthy of our investigation and practice. Based on the positive role of the separation between teaching and examination in teaching practice, the paper interpreted our research on the reform in separation between teaching and examination for postgraduate academic English at Inner Mongolia University, and testified the teaching concept of "promoting learning with pragmatic purpose" in POA applied to the teaching of postgraduate students' academic English writing. The new academic English teaching model based on POA is shown in **Figure 1**.

The theoretical frame of POA is composed of three parts which are teaching concept, teaching hypothesis and teaching process. The teaching concept illustrates the "learning center theory", and advocates that teaching should achieve its teaching objectives and promote effective learning. It emphasizes "promoting learning with pragmatic purpose" which closely combines input learning with output application, and all language activities in classroom teaching should be oriented for application (Wen, 2017b).

The teaching hypothesis of POA is based on output drive-input facilitation and emphasizes output-input-output. The output drive is the first step of the teaching process. The teacher drives the students to realize their limitations by trying to complete output activities and stimulate their enthusiasm for learning new knowledge through the teacher's scene design (Wen & Sun, 2020).
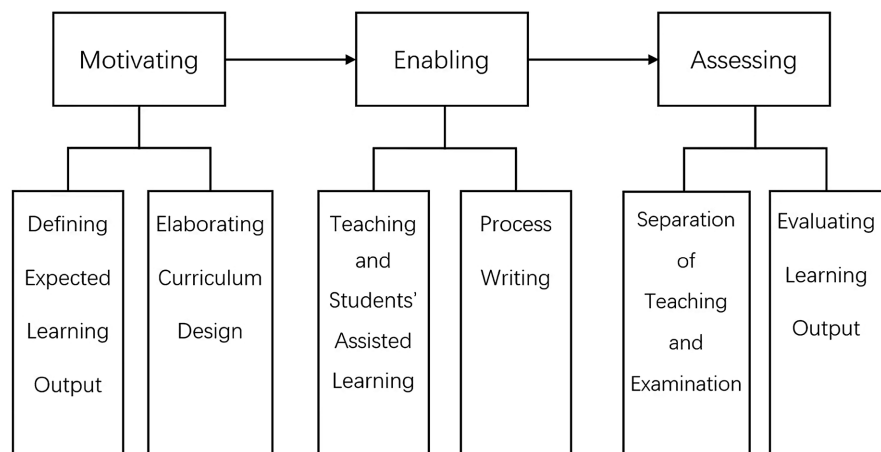
Figure 1. Teaching flow chart of separation of teaching and examination in postgraduate academic English course based on POA.

For instance, during a class, the teacher gives the students a research article and asks the students to write an abstract of the article. In the process of completing this production-oriented task, the students face difficulties and are inspired to learn new knowledge.

The teaching mode of POA emphasizes that the students' learning goals are the driving force of teaching, which decides the design of teaching activities and evaluation standards. The teacher should, in advance, target the course content and set objectives to be completed, so that the postgraduate students can have a clear understanding of the objectives of the course in advance. The teacher explained to the students that the teaching objectives and output tasks are to understand and master the discourse characteristics of English academic papers, master the skills of reading English academic papers, so as to improve the speed of reading English literature, and complete writing the abstracts of English academic papers in IMRD format as the standard framework.

2.1. Teaching Content

The textbook used in this course is Reading and Writing for Research Papers published by Tsinghua University Press. It is structured in four topics, with two academic articles under each topic. In terms of teaching content, the teacher takes the topic of plagiarism as an example to illustrate how to teach and learn the article: *Exploring University Students' Perception of Plagiarism: A Focus Group Study*. Through the teacher's thorough explanation of this academic article, the students are able to understand the discourse structure of an English academic paper in IMRD format as well as the structural elements of the abstract. Students get to know that the abstract of a research paper summarizes the essence and core points of the research work, which is the first source of information for a would-be reader, because readers can grasp the gist of the whole article by a quick reading of the abstract. Consequently, postgraduate students learn the two main features of an abstract which are its discourse structure with one sentence corresponding to one section of the paper, and the language style for condensing the contents of the paper.

The teacher guides the students to read and analyze the abstracts of two research papers. The teacher raises six questions and asks the students to discuss them in groups. The students have a group discussion on the questions related to the abstract. The six elements of structure in an abstract of a research paper can then be summarized by the students through peer assistance and group discussion, which are referred to as Topic Specification (TS), Background Information (BI), Purpose Statement (PS), Methodology and Data (MD), Results/Findings (RF), and Implications/Conclusions (IC).

The teacher shares the point with the students that the secret of a successful abstract lies in providing the most important information in a coherent sentence structure. The students are encouraged to practice and achieve a good writing of an abstract through frequent reading good samples, and then emulating them when they need to write one.

Through reading and analyzing the research paper, the teacher introduces the definition and criteria of academic plagiarism in thesis writing. Students discuss in groups the nature of academic misconduct and its possible consequences, and realize that plagiarism is a form of stealing when an author purposefully uses or cites original ideas or expressions from other authors but without marking sources. They also begin to know that unintentional plagiarism typically occurs when an author does not quote the source correctly. Therefore, it is critically important for postgraduate students to learn the proper ways of paraphrasing or summarizing through judicious use of quotations, and also wise to form good habits of note-taking while reading during the preparatory stage of research paper writing. The students discuss with each other on how to avoid plagiarism and why they should always indicate others' original words in quotation marks with due references, and particularly, the ideas that are derived from other sources should also be marked in case they may forget these ideas as time passes and misapply them as their own. By practicing proper ways of expressing research results and ideas, they could develop sound skills in both research and writing. Further, the teacher introduces the quotation conventions of APA style, MLA Style and Chicago Manual style in more detail, since the basic knowledge of these conventions can help postgraduate students to avoid unintentional plagiarism.

2.2. Teaching Presentation

The teaching of this course adopts the combination of teachers' teaching with students' mutual peer learning. Based on the Zone of Proximal Development Theory, Peer assisted learning means that learners of the same age or class consciously help their peers to learn, so as to promote learners' more effective autonomous learning, which includes peer counseling, peer demonstration, peer monitoring and peer evaluation. It is suitable for second language learners (Topping & Ehly, 1998). Peer assisted learning is an effective strategy to promote learning participation and improve learning effect (Dawson, 2014). Wen Qiufang also holds the cultivation of cooperative ability can be realized through students' special organizational activities and peer evaluation, and interdependent group activities are good ways to cultivate students' cooperative ability (Wen, 2018).

In teaching the whole course, the teacher divided the students into 10 groups for group discussion and activities. The teacher asked each member of the group to obtain a published international journal paper selected from their own discipline, preferably written by native English speakers, and then a small corpus of 4 to 5 research papers in the same discipline had been formed. Through teachers' teaching and students' peer mutual learning, graduate students had a thorough understanding of the main thrust and paragraph structure of the research papers, and learned the correct citation skills by practicing how to correctly paraphrase, summarize and quote, so as to finally help them promote writing in

English their research papers through reading good ones.

2.3. Application of Process Writing Approach in Academic English Writing Teaching

Process writing originated from native English writing teaching in the United States and gradually extended to second/foreign language teaching practice. The output-driven hypothesis put forward by Wen Qiufang makes process writing more widely used. The output-driven hypothesis emphasizes that output can have a greater driving force on the overall development of foreign language ability than input. If there is no driving force in the learning process, even if there is high-quality input, its acquisition efficiency is limited, and it is difficult for learners to form a good overall language ability. Process writing is an output driven learning process in which continuous communication among peers and between peers and the teacher is emphasized. In this process, the supervision and revision from peers and the teacher ensure the high-quality output of learners and the improvement of their overall language level.

To achieve the teaching goals, firstly, the teacher arranges a certain class time in advance to ensure an effective discussion between the teacher and students. Secondly, the teacher meticulously designs teaching materials and writing tasks with targeted goals. In order to encourage students to actively participate in the discussion, the teacher selects five English academic papers from top international journals, the topics of which can arouse students' interest in reading English research papers, and make students feel that academic research can be fun.

2.4. Separation of Teaching and Examination in the Course Assessment

The assessment method of combination of peer feedback and teacher feedback is adopted to polish and enhance postgraduate students' research papers, that is, the first draft of students' research papers is checked by their peers. For the peer revision process, the teacher provides detailed revising and scoring rules in advance and clarifies the revision responsibility. On the basis of peer feedback, postgraduate students modify and finish a second draft. After the teacher provides timely and effective feedback, the second draft is returned to the students for further modification, and the third draft (final draft) is submitted to the teacher. Each round of feedback and modification takes two weeks to ensure that the teacher and the students have sufficient time to finish the tasks.

Separation of teaching and examination, along with teaching evaluation based on POA, are introduced into the course assessment. Combined with computer technology and relevant products developed by Beijing Tianyan Rongzhi Software Co., Ltd., the open test question bank is constructed. According to the construction scheme of output question bank, multiple test questions in line with POA summative evaluation are constructed to guide the continuous improvement of POA teaching at our university.

The test content in students' final examination is primarily based on the textbook, but not totally limited to the textbook content so that students can have a wider space to actively expand knowledge and English thinking while learning the classroom content, so as to form a complementary relationship between classroom teaching and final assessment. It can obviously reduce the phenomenon that postgraduate students can get high scores only by making a hasty last-minute effort; and the assessment for their performances in the course will become more efficient and fair. In this new model, students change their focuses from merely learning English vocabulary and sentence to logically understanding the discourse structure of a paper and comprehensively mastering the standards of academic writing. The transformation can further upgrade postgraduate students' ability to participate in international academic exchanges.

3. Effectiveness of Teaching Exploration and Reform

In recent years, in the process of diligently exploring an efficient English teaching model for postgraduate students, we have achieved positive effects on upgrading students' academic English ability. Having benefited from our new teaching model, students have gradually gained fundamental skills in English language literacy and academic communication, and confidences in domestic and international academic activities. Simultaneously, teachers have also benefited in the concept "Teaching is Learning" and obtained an increasing accumulation of teaching and research results.

3.1. Transforming Students' English Learning from Rigid to Functional Models

The new teaching model based on POA focuses on the teaching concept of "promoting learning with pragmatic purpose", which has led to the change of graduate students' academic English learning concept. For example, a girl student in an interview vividly shared her feelings in her personal experience: "The biggest gain from academic English learning at my postgraduate stage is that I have learned how to pragmatically use English instead of merely learning English. The academic writing task assigned by the teacher enables me to apply English to practice, which is of great help to my writing of professional English academic papers". In an annual interview with graduate students, 84% students are glad to express that they have learned how to establish a research scope by introducing and reviewing previous and relevant research results in writing their research papers, and how to establish an innovation for the study by indicating a gap in the previous research or raising a question about it. By outlining purposes or stating the nature of the present research, they have learned how to make an offer to fill the gap. They have also got to know that the section of methodology illustrates how the research is carried out, which can be divided into a number of sub-sections, such as design, materials, participants, and procedure. Most students have learned to describe and present their research findings in the form of

tables, charts, graphs and lists in their own research papers that could help the reader to better understand the findings. In regard to the gist of demonstrating their research findings, most students assumed that the demanding part of a research paper was the discussion section before studying the course, but now they have learned how to logically arrange every section in this part by discussing the significance of the research findings. They also have a deep understanding of three elements of structure in the conclusion part.

3.2. Improving Learners' Academic Writing and Communicating Abilities in English

Through the completion of students' main tasks and sub tasks, such as personal academic writing, personal presentation, group discussion and group display, this teaching mode helps to generate students' ideas of writing research papers, cultivates students' ability of in-depth analysis and innovation, and greatly strengthens students' academic English writing motivation and self-confidence.

From 2016 to 2021, we conducted six questionnaires with postgraduate students. The results indicated that above 93.58% of students believed that although they faced challenges and puzzles at the beginning of their thesis writing and needed to spend a lot of time and energy on learning input materials and preparing output tasks, the pride brought about by successfully completing the tasks in English in various forms enhanced their sense of learning achievement and greatly improved their interest in learning English. It has also enhanced their confidence in reading English literature and publishing English academic papers independently. For example, the number of research papers of our postgraduate students included in SCI in 2017 increased by 12% and EI increased by 3.5 times compared with that in the previous year. From 2016 to 2021, we conducted interviews with 19 tutors who supervise postgraduate students in different disciplines at Inner Mongolia University, and they all fully acknowledged the impressive improvement of their students' abilities in reading literature, writing abstracts, and completing academic papers in English language.

3.3. Strengthening Teachers' Concept of Combining Scientific Research with Teaching Practice

Our teaching team has persistently attached importance to the combination of production, teaching, and research in teaching practices. We presently chair the research projects centering around the reform of postgraduate English teaching, one is granted by the Chinese Ministry of Education, and five are approved and funded at the provincial level. Notably, the team has won a university-level teaching achievements award, two teaching skills competition awards, one university-level excellent course, and one task for constructing an innovative English curriculum system for postgraduate in all subjects at Inner Mongolia University.

The achievements of teachers' scientific research and teaching research can jointly upgrade the level of the teaching in classroom. The practice of a variety of

innovative teaching modes can stimulate students' initiative and cultivate their academic language ability; and correspondingly, can improve the effect of teaching reform and realize the goal of mutual improvement between teaching and learning. Postgraduate students are highly satisfied with the teaching reform and the learning results in a series of surveys on teaching effects.

4. Conclusion

This study illustrates the preliminary effectiveness of the curriculum reform of general academic English for postgraduate students under the guidance of POA, which has enriched the empirical research results of Production-oriented Approach and expanded its application scope. The cutting-edge features and effects of this teaching reform are in a leading position among colleges and universities in Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, China, which bears enlightening and referential significance in postgraduate students' academic English teaching for other colleges and universities in the region, which has promoted the reform of academic English teaching for postgraduates in other universities in the region. Following the example of Inner Mongolia University, Inner Mongolia Agricultural University and Inner Mongolia University of Technology have changed their traditional English teaching that once focused solely on developing students' basic language skills, into the general academic English teaching for cultivation of academic English abilities. The two universities have carried out postgraduate academic English teaching reform, explored effective ways to improve graduate students' academic English ability in practice, and achieved remarkable results. Together with Inner Mongolia University, they have made great efforts and contributions in scientifically guiding the graduate English teaching in Inner Mongolia University to be more academic, practical, advanced and innovative.

The teaching reform model is still on its way to higher levels. In teaching practices, we have realized that, limited by subjective and objective conditions, the implementing processes and reforming details need to be further improved. However, in the era of globalization, both teachers and postgraduate students should shoulder a common goal that academic English ability plays a critical role in international communication activities and in establishing Chinese academic discourse. With the guidance of the Production-oriented Approach, and specifically on the basis of the present research, we suggest that future research continue from the perspectives of fully promoting a dynamic mutual transformation of teachers' role in teaching and students' subjective initiative in learning.

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Conflicts of Interest

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

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