

# Professional Content-Based Graduate English Course Reform in China

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## ABSTRACT

Graduate English, as a general language course, has been unable to meet the academic and professional needs of graduate students in China. A survey on the status quo of postgraduate English courses is made in a Chinese University, which has disclosed a number of problems, including unclear target orientation, homogeneous curriculum setting, insufficient teacher input and weak intrinsic motivation. A course reform plan which is demand-oriented, professional content-based, and targeted at improving the learners' academic and professional communication ability is proposed to get a win-win situation for both teachers and graduate students.

**Keywords:** *general English, academic English, content-based, course reform*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*Graduate English* has been one of the compulsory degree courses for non-English major graduates in China. According to *The Requirements of the Syllabus for Non-English Majors* (thereafter the Syllabus)[1], the purpose of graduate English teaching is to enable students to master English as a tool for their study, research and international exchanges... so as to develop and improve their ability to use the language. In other words, Graduate English courses should be combined with majors, aiming at enhancing their ability for academic research.

In the context of internationalization and diversification, college students are faced with multi-dimensional demands of English language, ranging from literature reading, academic research and communication, writing of papers and abstracts, and professional competition. However, most postgraduate courses in Chinese Universities remain to be a language training course, emphasizing the practical and humanistic nature of language learning, without integrating professional knowledge into language learning.

This article makes a brief survey on the postgraduate English course setting, faculty configuration, motivation and expectations of students in a certain Chinese University. Finally, a scheme, which is demand-oriented and professional content-based for Graduate English course reform is proposed.

## 2. CURRENT PROBLEMS

At present, Graduate English is still regarded as a general language course, aiming to cultivate language skills such as listening, reading, speaking, translating and writing. However, a series of problems have already emerged.

### 2.1. Vague Target

According to the Syllabus, the teaching objectives of Graduate English can be divided into two levels: the first one is to develop the five basic language skills; the second is to improve language application abilities, which have been explicitly stated as "to master professional words and phrases", "to be able to read professional documents in English", "to be able to translate major-related materials" and "to be able to write abstracts in English" and so on.

In spite of the professional and orientational differences among Chinese universities, the course and teaching paradigm of Graduate English are basically the same. The course usually lasts for one academic year, and differs lightly from College English in teaching material selection and course setting. The difference can only be displayed by a mild increase of words of less frequency, and structures of more complexity and topics of higher horizon. In other words, graduate English course is essentially regarded as an extension of College English.

## **2.2. Homogeneous Course setting**

As required by the Syllabus, both general English course and professional one are essential for graduate students. However, most universities in China only offer basic language courses. That is to say, most universities focus on the training of language skills, while ignoring its combination with the learners professional fields.

We took a brief survey in a university featuring in the majors of finance and economics. In this university, most majors have a very high demand for English, such as international accounting, international trade and international logistics. However, the credit-hours for English courses for graduates is only 48, among which 32 hours is allocated in the first semester and 16 hours in the second. The limited credit hour makes it impossible to meet the learners' professional needs.

The textbook used is Contemporary Graduate English (Reading and Writing) (2002) by Foreign language Teaching and Research Press, which is targeted at improving learners' general language abilities. The course setting does not reflect the features of the University. Due to the decoupling of English courses from professional knowledge and academic needs, students' interest and enthusiasm in taking the Graduate English course is destined to be low. In another aspect, students' practical abilities to follow international financial hot issues and to do academic reading and translating are insufficient.

## **2.3. Insufficient teaching staff**

Currently, most universities in China do not have specialized teaching staff for Graduate English Courses. In recent years, the enrolment of graduates in higher institutions has increased rapidly and constantly. The limited number of teachers cannot meet the increasing needs for teaching staff. The compromise most Chinese Universities make is to increase the capacity of each class. Therefore, students from different majors and of diversified language proficiency are put into the same class, which makes language learning and teaching less effective.

However, if all the classes are organized according to the students' major and language proficiency and in smaller sizes, it is high necessary to conduct research on the selection of teaching materials, curriculum construction and management. All the tasks call for long-term involvement of a large number of specialized and stable teaching staff[2].

In the university under our investigation, the number of graduates has been radically increasing in recent years. The tendency can be shown from a comparison between the diversified professional background of the students and the comparatively homogenous educational background of the teachers.

The statistics in September 2018 shows that there is a total of 1900 master candidates, with 13 different majors, ranging from accounting, business administration, finance, taxation, insurance, audit, asset evaluation, public administration, international business, law, applied statistics, translation to Chinese international education. These majors are very comprehensive, and cover the disciplines from economics, management, literature, law, science to philosophy.

However, it is a totally different story as to the teaching staff. There are only 6 teachers who give lectures to almost two thousand graduate students in the whole university. These contrastive numbers clearly tell us that it is impossible to implement stratified and diversified teaching paradigms.

What's more, the educational background of the teachers is rather homogenous. There are 92 full-time teachers in the school of Foreign Languages in this university. Most of them got masters' degree in English Education, English literature, linguistics, or translation studies. They are faced with a dilemma. On the one hand, the credits for the Graduate English course have been gradually cut off (from 9 credits to 4 credits), thus making it difficult for the teachers to complete the workload required by the university. On the other hand, with the enhancement of students' English proficiency, teachers have fallen into an awkward situation without "professional knowledge" to offer.

In another word, the professional knowledge and language proficiency of English teachers are petrified or even declining. [3]. It has become an inevitable demand for graduate students to integrate their professional knowledge into English teaching. The development of specialty brings a rare opportunity for the development of English teachers in colleges and universities, especially those with professional characteristics, yet it is also a great challenge.

There is currently a catch-22 in universities. Many schools offer professional courses in English, but with insufficient language proficiency of the teachers, and most of these courses finally become bilingual courses or Chinese dominating courses. On another hand, graduate English course which is supposed to improve the international academic communication ability of students has fallen to be a comprehensive English course.

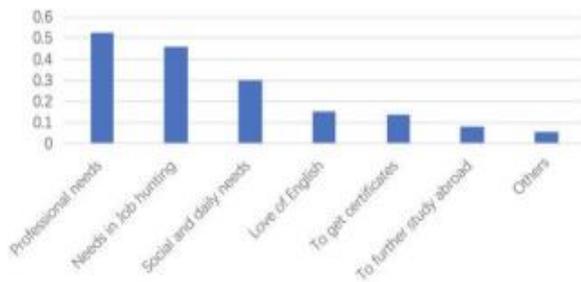
The curriculum reform brings both opportunities and challenges to English teachers in universities.

## **2.4. Weak motivation of the learners**

For most graduates nowadays, after learning English for more than 10 years, their average language capacities are sufficient to meet the demand for daily communication. General English courses can no longer satisfy their desire for higher levels of knowledge. They are more eager to read professional documents, write articles or abstracts and

participate in more seminars and symposium in English. However, the status in quo is that general English, as a required degree course, is compulsory but unattractive. Although some universities authorize students who have passed CET-6 to choose take Graduate English courses or not on their own will, the vast majority of graduate students, in order to obtain higher GPAs, are still willing to participate in the course. It is obvious that the motivation to take the course is extrinsic and weak. Meanwhile, students' desire to improve their ability to acquire professional knowledge in English cannot be satisfied. To sum up, the lack of intrinsic motivation in language learning in non-English major graduates is self-evident.

An online survey, concerning the motivation of English learning, is made with 128 graduate students who are newly enrolled in Sept. 2020 in the target university. A total of 120 valid questionnaires have been received. The results are as follows:



**Figure 1.** Motivations to take Graduate English course

It can be seen from the above figure that the demand for professional English is considerable, followed by the need of occupation and life, which highlights the instrumental and practical nature of English. Due to the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic and the international situation, the current willingness of graduate students to go abroad for further study is recently not strong. Meanwhile, most graduates have already obtained CET-6 certificates, so obtaining certificates is also not their main motivation at this period. It is also within expectation that the proportion of students who like the English language itself is rather low, for the master candidates already have clear majors preference.

### 3. COURSE REFORM AND TEACHING PARADIGMS

In view of the above situation and problems, this paper puts forward a content-based, professional needs-oriented graduate English course reform scheme.

#### 3.1. To Adjust the Course target

Shu (2012) pointed out that the goal of English teaching in colleges is to "develop students' English communication skills needed to participate in international affairs and competition"[4]. Therefore, teachers are expected to create a diversified language environment in accordance with students' learning ability and academic background, so as to stimulate their intrinsic motivation and cultivate their language comprehensive ability, and extend these abilities to extra-curriculum activities, so that the target for lifelong learning can be realized.

Based on the above objectives, the target of English language teaching should be focused on the development of students' professional abilities, including professional literature retrieval and reading ability, notetaking ability, and the ability to summarize academic lectures, write abstracts, make reports and presentations on their scientific research, communicate with foreign researchers at academic seminars, etc. Only this target is set to clear, can the transformation from general English to academic English be possibly achieved.

#### 3.2. To Enrich the course setting

Academic English is a branch of specialized English (English for Specific Purpose)[5], which needs to be supported by certain professional content. Many studies at home and abroad have proved that this course scheme can help students to transit smoothly from beginners to higher level learners[6], and is an effective second foreign language teaching model[7].

Since graduate English is strongly goal-oriented and professional, it is advisable to divide Graduate English course into different modules: general English module, academic English module and professional English module. Students can choose to take the classes according to their language proficiency and professional needs. The English curriculum for graduates we propose can be illustrated as in table1:

**Table 1.** Proposed Courses for Graduate English

	Term	Content	Obligation	Credits
GE	1 <sup>st</sup>	Comprehensive language course	Optional with CET6 certificate Required without CET6 certificate	2

AE	1 <sup>st</sup> /2 <sup>nd</sup>	4 disciplines optional: Humanity/Economics/science/ Medicine	Required--2 credits Optional--2 credits	2+2
PE	2 <sup>nd</sup> /3 <sup>rd</sup>	Major and content based	Optional--2/4 credits	2+2

Note: GE: General English; AE: Academic English; PE: Professional English

Students can decide to take general English courses or not according to their language proficiency. If a student has passed CET 6, and considers his language capacity high enough to take the academic English course, he can choose to start from Academic English, and move on to professional English courses, or choose to have academic English courses for 2 semesters. The minimal credit a graduate is required to get is 4, while the maximum is 6.

It is noteworthy that academic English is not a general term of umbrella from which students can choose different disciplines. As to professional English, universities can set up specialized and featured courses according to their facilities, capacity and the characteristics of the school, and also take students' expectations and needs into consideration.

The reformed courses offer students of different proficiency and needs with different options, and would arouse their intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn English.

The university under our investigation is a higher institute prominent in the field of finance and economics. Most graduate students majoring in finance and economics would enter highly internationalized industry after graduation, which calls for a more handy demand and also provides a great advantage for setting up the academic and professional English courses in this university.

A survey is conducted among the 128 newly-enrolled graduates about the setting and their expectations of graduate English courses, and the results are shown as follows:

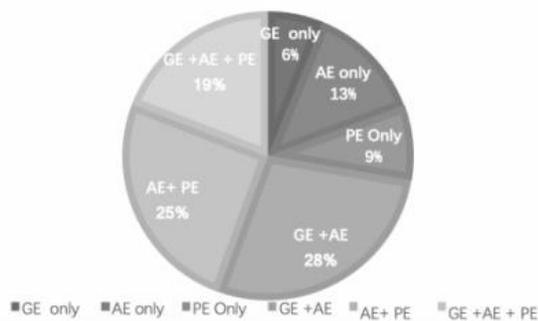


Figure 2. Student's Expectations for Graduated English

From the above figure, we can see that students' demand for professional academic English far exceeds that for general English. Altogether, 85% of the subject expects to take the course of academic English. Most students wish the school can offer a variety of courses for them to choose. In contrast, only approximately 6% of our subject wishes to have single general English courses.

This survey provides us with confidence that academic and professional English courses can be set up in this University of finance and economics. Specific scheme should include:

(1) Make academic English as the core course of Graduate English.

The present setting of graduate English course should be changed, and general English teaching with the goal of improving language ability will be transformed into academic English teaching based on professional knowledge.

(2) Enhance international academic communication capabilities.

The course reform, which is demand-oriented, based on professional content and aimed at improving academic and international communication ability, has practical significance for promoting graduate English teaching under the background of globalization.

(3) Highlight the financial and economic features of the university.

A serial of tailor-made courses are provided to meet the demands of students from the university of finance and economics. In general English courses, more importance is to made to develop students' humanistic literacy, international horizon and cross-cultural communication ability. However, in academic English, courses related to students' disciplines and specialties are offered, targeted at improving their ability to do literature review, seminar and reports, and academic writing in English, and finally enhancing their international competitiveness. Eventually, the academic English would become a second academic class for graduates, and therefore improve their academic ability and enhance their international competitiveness professionally.

(4) Become an extension of professional study.

The major of graduates should be highlighted, the course structure and teaching content be optimized to promote the

development of characteristics of each higher institute. In particular, academic English courses should integrate language competence into students' academic disciplines, and thus become an indispensable and significant part of their professional study.

### **3.3. A win-win course**

The course put forward is a win-win paradigm, which can be tested from two aspects:

(1) Academic English teaching is to facilitate their professional ability by English learning and to promote language competency in learning specialized courses in English. Students are supposed to read authentic English literature, write reports and exchange in international academic conferences. Graduate English learning and professional learning complement each other and promote each other. As these courses entail a lot of research work, team work and presentations, students' team-work spirit as well as critical thinking abilities are enhanced.

(2) This reformed course scheme can also help teacher to get out of the above-mentioned occupational dilemma, and give them a stronger sense of professional achievements. The teacher's roles are changed into more diversified ones, s/he does not only teach English language skills, but also serves as a designer, planner, mentor, and facilitator of academic task activities. They can combine their own academic advantage and research interests with language teaching, and also participate in more occupational training, and enhance their academic abilities.

In short, this paradigm is a win-win situation between teachers and students. They could integrate the learning of a language with the enhancement of professional knowledge. From the teacher's point of view, it is a way out to face a more academic career and to be a more knowledgeable and qualified college professor.

## **4. CONCLUSION**

Nowadays, the universities in China are actively promoting the internationalization of graduate education, and pay great attention to expanding students' international

horizons. In such a situation, Graduate English should be multi-dimensional, diversified, academic and professional-orientated. An active curriculum reform should be carried, and a series of academic English textbook be developed, professional content-based courses designed, and finally, the effectiveness of graduate English teaching be enhanced. To sum up, it has already been a high time to carry out Graduate English curriculum reform in Chinese Universities.

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