

A Scoping Review of Research on English Academic Writing for Chinese Graduate Students

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Abstract: Based on 16 studies on Chinese graduate students' English academic writing, this paper summarizes the current research trends in China from the aspect of research methods and content. After combing and summarizing, it is found that: (1) most relevant researches in China have adopted three forms of research methods, which are: questionnaire survey or interview survey, classroom observation and text analysis. (2) currently, challenges in the English academic writing process for Chinese graduate students primarily revolve around inappropriate language usage and insufficient writing skills. (3) The solutions proposed at present mainly include improving students' writing ability in practical exercises, implementing new teaching models and introducing new teaching methods. It is helpful to find and summarize the problems existing in the current English academic writing courses in China, as well as the difficulties existing in the process of English academic writing for Chinese graduate students, so as to help them improve their English academic writing ability.

Keywords: English Academic Writing, Graduate Students, Literature Review.

1. Introduction

With the advent of economic globalization, English has emerged as a universal language, prompting an increasing number of nations to adopt it as a second language. Moreover, the process of globalization has elevated English to the status of a lingua franca and the primary language for international academic discourse. Consequently, English is assuming growing significance as the principal medium for disseminating academic knowledge. Especially for postgraduates, English academic writing ability is an indispensable and important ability, as it is essential for them to publish in international journals or participate in academic conferences during their postgraduate studies. Cultivating and improving English academic writing ability can help postgraduates align with international research and engage in academic exchanges with foreign scholars.

However, for a long time, the English writing ability of Chinese students has been in need of improvement, which is closely related to the mode of English teaching in our country. From junior high school to college, English teaching places great emphasis on cultivating students' reading and writing abilities, but their writing abilities have not been significantly improved. One main reason is that students love to use template writing, so their writing abilities have not truly improved. Similarly, the English academic writing ability of Chinese graduate students also urgently needs to be improved. Although graduate students from various majors actively produce research results in their respective fields, they also encounter various difficulties and challenges in writing academic papers and submitting them. English academic writing is a special form of English writing, which has a specific academic language, format, pattern, and framework. Compared to ordinary English argumentative writing, academic writing in English has more external requirements due to its uniqueness, but at the same time, it is easier to learn because of its complete and specific framework.

To sum up, it is very necessary to understand the current problems of graduate students in writing English academic papers and explore the strategies to solve them, which will

help students write English academic papers more standardized in the future and avoid some common problems and mistakes. In addition, it can help students learn writing mode and language, improve language application ability, train logical thinking ability, and cultivate rigorous academic norms and operational ability through literature review, so as to lay a foundation for future academic research.

This paper will review relevant domestic literature, sort out some problems in English academic writing for graduate students from aspects of research methods and content, and put forward corresponding solutions.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Challenges in English Academic Writing for Graduate Students

There have been a lot of relevant researches on academic English writing, which have adopted different research methods to investigate the problems existing in Chinese students' English academic writing. A large part of the research uses graduate students' English essays as corpus to compare with native English speakers' essays to find out the problems of foreign students' English essay writing. For example, Xu (2013) made a comparative analysis of 120 English degree theses and 240 international core journal papers, trying to describe the use and development characteristics of engagement markers in English academic writing. It is found that in general, There are fewer intervening modifier in student papers than in journal papers, but significantly more directive markers than journal papers. From the perspective of development trend, the use of three kinds of engagement markers presents three different development characteristics, and the obvious difference appears between undergraduate and master's theses. The results of this study can also provide some implications for teaching: (1) The use of readers' personal and shared knowledge markers should be strengthened. (2) Pay attention to observing and imitating the use of instruction language in international journal papers, and teachers pay more attention to students' abuse of obligatory modal verbs and imperative

verbs. (3) In undergraduate dissertation teaching, teachers should focus on the correct use of instruction language and reader personal markers; while in master's dissertation teaching, teachers should remind students to pay attention to the use of shared knowledge markers; while in doctoral dissertation teaching, they should pay attention to the choice of words in engagement markers and distinguish the subtle differences in words. Based on 50 English major graduate papers, Lou (2011) analyzed the characteristics of the use of reporting verbs, found the existing problems and proposed countermeasures. Ma and Qin (2014) used 10 master's theses as corpus to explore the types of text borrowing strategies used in citation discourse and their distribution characteristics in second language academic writing. At the same time, the main problems that students face in the process of text borrowing were also discovered: (1) there are improper text borrowing in students' papers, that is, more close to the interpretation (patchwork); (2) Replication occurs mostly in literature review; (3) Students have a low sense of authorship in academic writing, so they try to avoid using direct quotes. Yu Jianping et al. (2011) investigated the problems existing in Chinese students' English academic writing by taking the 2009 graduate students and doctoral students of non-English majors in Yanshan University as the research objects and using their academic writing texts as the corpus. They found the following main problems in college students' English academic writing: (1) poor English language expression; (2) The academic writing does not meet the academic writing standards, and does not understand the characteristics of the academic paper genre; (3) Lack of interaction with readers in academic writing; (4) Lack of learning initiative in academic writing. Liu and Zhang (2023), with the aim of optimizing the meta-discourse of graduate students' English academic writing ability, refer to Hyland's meta-discourse model and use text analysis method to investigate the use of meta-discourse in first-year graduate students' academic English essay writing, and draw the following conclusions: (1) The degree of meta-discourse distribution is low; (2) The three types with the highest frequency of meta-discourse are transition mark, frame mark and fuzzy speech; (3) The frequency of use of meta-discourse is positively correlated with the quality of academic English writing.

Some studies have adopted the form of classroom observation. By observing students' performance in English academic writing classes, researchers generally summarize the problems existing in Chinese students' English academic writing. Xiong and Yin (2009) compared Chinese and American academic English writing and analyzed the characteristics of American academic English classroom teaching. Then they put forward the idea of constructing academic English writing classroom for non-English major undergraduates and postgraduates in China, which provides a reference for the research and teaching of academic English writing in China. For example: to promote writing by reading, to develop writing ideas by group activities, to promote the improvement of writing results by writing process evaluation. Zhu (2020) conducted academic writing training for first-year non-English major postgraduates in her university. During the teaching process, some problems in academic writing have been found: (1) Students were not familiar with the structure of academic writing. (2) Students tend to ignore the writing process. In the stage of collecting materials, students' ideas are confused. Because of unclear ideas, their organizational structure is not reasonable, which leads to the confusion of the

writing process. After writing, they often forget to check and revise their writing. (3) There are many language problems in the paper. The main problems are the improper use of professional terms, improper use of English sentence patterns and subjective expression in the process of paper writing. Focusing on the problems in the teaching practice of academic writing, this research analyzes the problems and puts forward some pertinent suggestions.

Based on classroom observation, some researchers further use questionnaires and interviews to investigate the problems encountered by students in English academic papers, which is helpful for teachers to view English academic paper writing from the perspective of students, deeply understand students' views and attitudes towards it, and then improve teaching in a targeted way. For example, Liu and Liu (2014) explored the academic English writing process of 21 graduate students through questionnaire surveys and interviews, and investigated their views on the factors affecting academic English paper writing, the challenges encountered in the writing process, and the coping strategies they adopted. According to the results of the questionnaire and interview, these graduate students did not have much confusion about the steps and process of English academic writing, and their writing process was basically the same. In terms of their views on the factors that affect the writing of academic English papers, they think that the most important factors are logic, good ideas, overall structure, relevance to the topic content, task handling, etc. The important factors that affect my writing of English academic papers include mother tongue habits, cultural thinking, lack of writing training, vocabulary and sentence patterns. In the process of writing academic English papers, they encountered various difficulties and challenges, including introduction, literature review, discussion, conclusion, etc. The difficulties at the micro level include poor English foundation, imprecise expression, text logic and so on. To solve the above problems, these interviewed graduate students said that they generally adopted strategies such as reading more literature and imitating published papers, and hoped to get help from teachers. Luo and Xiao (2011) studied the EAP acquisition process of four postgraduate students in a research institute of Wuhan University of Science and Technology through semi-structured interviews. The results show that even if the postgraduate students have a poor English foundation, as long as the motivation is strong enough, it is entirely possible to acquire high academic English ability, especially reading and writing ability, through extensive and in-depth reading of professional English literature under the guidance of their tutors.

2.2. Strategies to Address Challenges in Chinese English Academic Writing

In response to the problems encountered by Chinese students in English academic writing, some scholars and teachers have attempted to explore methods to solve the problems and propose corresponding strategies. Part of the research is based on the current teaching situation of English academic writing courses and proposes some teaching suggestions. For example, Liu et al. (2014) suggest that universities should offer academic English writing courses tailored to the needs of students. Moreover, teachers who offer such courses need to be familiar with the process and norms of academic English writing, and preferably have experience in writing and publishing academic English papers,

Only in this way can they better and more effectively assist students in writing academic English papers. Zhu (2020) suggests: (1) Exercise students' thinking abilities in practice. (2) Use sample essays to cultivate English proficiency. Teachers can provide students with some excellent English papers for them to learn and imitate. (3) Cultivate a positive writing attitude among graduate students. However, these suggestions are too general and broad, without specific practical steps, so they have little practical significance for improving English academic paper writing courses.

In view of the shortcomings of the above studies, some scholars began to explore the application of specific teaching methods and models in English academic writing courses. Wang (2010) proposed the implementation of autonomous learning strategies in English academic writing classes. Students should be responsible for their own learning, that is, learners consciously self-plan, self-management, self-control and self-assessment of learning during the course of study, and then develop into independent lifelong learners. In this paper, the author explains how to carry out independent learning in the English academic writing class from the above three aspects. Although in theory, it is feasible and effective to implement autonomous learning strategies in English academic writing classes, in practice, self-regulated learning strategies are only suitable for intermediate and advanced English learners. For most students in China, English academic writing is a difficult course, so it still needs a lot of guidance and supervision from teachers. The effectiveness of self-regulated learning is still questionable. Xiong (2011) tries to explain academic writing with activity theory, arguing that academic English ability not only requires language skills, but also includes academic language, discourse of academic papers and scientific thinking. Based on the above views, the author uses activity theory to build a model of English academic writing process in the classroom teaching environment, as shown in Figure 1. According to this model, learners improve their English academic writing ability through the mediating effects of the following three factors: 1. Model essays, scientific thinking; 2. Academic writing genres and norms, academic language, and academic essay texts; 3. Teacher's explanation, interaction between learners and teachers. The three elements of English academic writing are academic language, discourse of academic papers and scientific thinking. These three factors play an important role in the process of English academic writing. Writing teachers should give feedback on the three aspects of language, text structure and scientific thinking.

Wei (2011) proposed that the implementation of scaffolding teaching strategies in the teaching of English academic writing can effectively help students understand and internalize relevant knowledge and skills, and promote the acquisition and application of new knowledge. The author explains in detail how teachers should provide scaffolding for students from three stages of teaching: topic selection, data retrieval and evaluation, and literature use. However, this scaffolding teaching strategy can only provide students with a general framework of guidance and can guide the general steps of thesis writing. However, in the actual process of thesis writing, students will still encounter some difficulties in writing skills and language, and these problems need to be solved.

Liu and Zhang (2023), starting with the meta-discourse in students' English academic papers, proposed meta-discourse optimization strategies to improve graduate students'

academic English writing ability: (1) Firmly grasp different expression forms of meta-discourse. (2) Improve the application ability of Meta discourse through practical training. (3) Play a multi-directional role in the optimization of the meta-discourse model in writing. Chen and Xiang (2015) tried to use corpora in class to assist students in paper writing. They use the University of Michigan High-Level Student Essay Corpus (MICUSP) to assist students in English academic essay writing, and apply it to academic writing teaching practice to cultivate students' ability to analyze the genre structure and discourse structure of essays and standardize the use of academic vocabulary. However, corpus-based teaching of academic English writing still has a lot to be improved. For example, it is necessary to build a small corpus of academic English writing for non-native language learners to collect the typical corpus of English writing for learners of different majors and levels. By comparing with the corpus of native language learners, researchers find out the internal differences and analyze the reasons, which will be of direct help to improve the writing ability of non-native language learners.

However, the above research has only focused on theory and has not applied the proposed ideas to specific practice to prove their effectiveness. However, there are also some scholars who have combined theory with practice to prove the effectiveness of their proposed methods. Huang Jie et al. (2016) attempted to use the GBI teaching method to guide students in writing the literature review section of their papers, as shown in Figure 2. This study set up an experimental class and a control class. The experimental class taught paper writing according to the GBI teaching model, while the experimental class adopted traditional teaching methods. According to the comparison of writing scores between the experimental class and the control class, GBI teaching not only enables learners to master certain language knowledge in a short period of time, but also makes a significant contribution to the improvement of learners' comprehensive writing abilities. This study demonstrates that GBI teaching helps learners to recognize and master the linguistic features and writing methods of academic papers, and has practical significance in improving their comprehensive writing abilities. Zhang and Yang (2019), guided by the cycle model of professional English literature reading, translation, and writing, explore the connection between professional knowledge and language teaching, and rely on the collaborative efforts of English teachers, professional mentors, and master's students to gradually build a "three in one" EAW teaching model, exploring the establishment of a curriculum system that meets the development of students' English academic writing ability. And the curriculum system has been gradually implemented in the school where the author teaches, with significant results. Cai (2018) introduced the practice of the course "International Journal Paper Writing and Publication" conducted by Fudan University for graduate students. The practice results proved that the course has achieved good results, and it also provides reference experience for Chinese universities to set up interdisciplinary academic English courses for graduate students. In this course, the most significant reference is the specific implementation of the course, which includes four parts, respectively: (1) This course uses two textbooks: *Writing Scientific Articles: Strategies and Steps*, *English for Academic Purposes - Science and Technology*. (2) Method. Courses are taught in a combination of lectures and group discussions. The teacher

divided the class of 22 students into five groups by subject. The presenter asked each member of the group to prepare a published international journal paper from their discipline (emphasizing that it is best written by a native English speaker), and then formed a small corpus from these four or five papers from the same discipline. Discussion and activities are conducted in small groups throughout the course. (3) Review. The assessment of this course is divided into ordinary work assessment and course assessment, accounting for 80% and 20% respectively. (4) Content. The content is divided into the full text structure explanation, the result part explanation, the introduction part explanation, the discussion part explanation, the use of corpus, the submission publication and the explanation of academic norms. Academic English can be divided into general Academic English and specialized Academic English. Through the practice of this course, this course provides a reference for the development of specialized academic English. The author proposes that special academic English can be offered across disciplines and majors.

3. Method

This paper adopts the literature research method. First, the topic of the study is the problems encountered by Chinese graduate students in the process of writing English academic papers and the corresponding solutions. Secondly, by searching the keywords "English academic paper writing", "English paper writing" and "academic writing" on CNKI, a large number of relevant studies will be displayed on the page according to the degree of relevance. Then the literature was screened. The specific approach is to first select papers with a high number of citations from the page, and then remove papers that do not conform to the research theme, such as the research of Chinese academic papers or the research of English academic paper writing for undergraduates. According to the degree of relevance, and then select the papers with high citations, so that not only can ensure the relevance of the selected literature, but also ensure the quality of the selected literature. The reason for preferentially selecting studies with higher citations is to ensure the quality of the selected studies, because in general, papers with higher citations have higher quality and higher recognition. However, the selection of literature according to the number of citations may also select some papers that do not meet the requirements of the topic, so it is necessary to screen. The selected literature should meet the following conditions: (1) The research object is Chinese graduate students. (2) The research content is the problems encountered by Chinese graduate students in the process of writing English academic papers. (3) The study should propose corresponding measures to address these problems. In other words, papers that do not meet the above criteria should be screened out. In addition, due to the limited space of this paper, 16 relevant studies were selected after screening.

After obtaining these 16 articles, this paper is to summarize and sort out these studies. This paper summarizes and classifies from two aspects: the first is to summarize the research methods of these papers, and the second is to summarize their research content. In these studies, the problems existing in the writing of graduate English academic papers are pointed out, but the solutions are different. Some studies simply put forward teaching suggestions based on the problems existing in the writing of graduate academic English papers; some studies put forward new models and teaching

methods; and a small number of studies do empirical research on the basis of the proposed new teaching models and methods, using data to illustrate the feasibility of these new teaching methods in the teaching of graduate academic English writing.

After sorting out these two aspects, we can roughly present the trends and trends of the research on graduate English academic writing in recent years, and clearly understand the problems existing in Chinese graduate students' English academic writing in recent years and the corresponding solutions. On the one hand, it can help our graduate students to find their own solutions to the problems in English writing. On the other hand, it is helpful for the teachers of this course to understand the problems of current graduate students in this course, and adjust the teaching mode and methods accordingly, so as to effectively help students improve their English academic paper writing level.

4. Results and Discussion

In terms of research methods, three forms of research methods are adopted to investigate the problems of Chinese students in English essay writing, which are: questionnaire interview survey, classroom observation and text analysis. In the early years, relevant researches mainly used classroom observation to investigate some problems encountered by students in the course. Generally, teachers who teach English academic paper writing make targeted adjustments to classroom teaching and help students solve problems by observing their own classroom and students' performance. However, the use of questionnaire survey and interview method can be more targeted to directly investigate the problems of students in the process of English essay writing as well as the key points and difficulties of students, improve the course of essay writing according to the suggestions of students, and provide students with the help they need, which reflects the subjectivity of students. In recent years, more studies have adopted text analysis method, which directly takes students' papers as corpus to analyze the problems in the writing of students' papers, which is a more objective and intuitive way. Since many students are unaware of their own problems when writing English academic papers, only questionnaires and interviews can not fully investigate the difficulties encountered by students when writing English papers. Therefore, teachers can directly analyze their papers, fully present the problems existing in their papers, and then take effective measures to help students solve these problems.

In terms of research content, The problems in writing graduate English academic papers have been pointed out in these studies. These problems can be roughly divided into two categories: the problems in writing language and the problems in writing skills. Language problems include: improper use of professional terms, improper use of English sentence patterns, subjective expression, language logic is not strong. The problems in writing skills include: improper use of markers, paraphrasing verbs, text borrowing strategies, and Meta discourse; Irregular academic format; Incomplete paper structure; And chaotic textual structure. To solve the above problems, different studies put forward different countermeasures :(1) Students imitate model writing. (2) Implement independent learning strategies in class to give play to students' subjectivity. (3) Construct a model of the writing process of English academic papers under the theory of activism. (4) Implement scaffolding teaching strategies in the teaching of English academic paper writing. (5) Improve

the ability to use Meta

discourse through practical training. (6) Introducing corpora into the classroom to assist students in paper writing (7) implementing the GBI teaching method. (8) Construct the "Trinity" EAW teaching model and apply it to teaching practice. (9) Based on the theory of category analysis, corpus construction and meta-discourse analysis, the curriculum system is constructed by combining lectures and group discussions. Most of the above countermeasures remain theoretical, and only a small number of studies have conducted experiments to prove the effectiveness of their proposed methods. However, in general, these methods and models have not been universally recognized, nor have they formed a complete teaching system. They only provide some methods for teachers to help students with their problems. Front-line teachers should also teach students according to their aptitude, and teach the course according to their own observations in teaching. In addition, researchers almost always focus on teaching strategies, ignoring students' subjective initiative and emotional factors. Teachers should also give full play to the main role of students, teach students according to their aptitude, respect students' attitude, and appropriately adopt students' opinions.

To sum up, in terms of research methods, the classroom observation method, questionnaire interview method, and text analysis method can be combined in future research to continue to study the problems of graduate students' English academic writing because any single method cannot properly consider all the influencing factors. By combining these three methods, both objectivity and students' subjective initiative can be taken into account to investigate the problems of students' English academic writing in all aspects. In terms of the research content, the previous research mainly focused on the language problems and writing skills of students in English papers, but they are not deep and specific enough. Future research could focus on a small part of essay writing, such as modal verbs, the use of hedges, or a particular part of the essay, such as the abstract or introduction.

5. Conclusion

Based on a review of 16 studies on Chinese graduate English thesis writing, this paper delineates the current research trends in China concerning research methods and content. Upon thorough examination and synthesis, the following observations emerge: (1) The predominant research methods employed by Chinese researchers include questionnaire surveys or interviews, classroom observation, and text analysis. (2) At present, the problems of improper use of writing language and lack of academic writing skills in English academic writing for graduate students in China mainly exist. (3) The solutions proposed at present mainly include improving students' writing ability in practice, implementing new teaching models and introducing new teaching methods, which will help students write English academic papers more standardized in the future and avoid some common problems and mistakes.

Understanding the current challenges faced by Chinese graduate students in writing English academic papers and exploring strategies to address these issues will contribute to the refinement of English thesis writing courses. This, in turn, will better assist students in honing their language application skills, refining their logical thinking abilities, and instilling adherence to rigorous academic norms and operational proficiency. This lays a crucial foundation for future academic

research.

It's essential to acknowledge that this paper, based on the review of 16 relevant studies, has certain limitations and may not fully encapsulate the entire landscape of research on English thesis writing for Chinese graduate students. Furthermore, the selected literature is exclusively Chinese due to the specific focus on Chinese graduate students, despite the possibility of relevant research on Chinese graduate students' English thesis writing conducted abroad. It is advisable to explore and consider international research in this area for a more comprehensive perspective.

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