

# A Scoping Review of Research on the Current Status of Graduate Students' English Academic Thesis Writing

Lele Dang

School of Foreign Languages, Southwest Petroleum University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

---

**Abstract:** In recent years, English academic writing has received wide attention in the field of English teaching in recent years. It is found that the English academic writing ability of Chinese university students is generally low. More than 80% of the English papers submitted by graduate students to international conferences or international journals are rejected due to English writing problems. In the face of the many problems that exist in graduate students' English academic writing process, teachers of writing courses need to actively face students' English writing problems, analyze these problems and find effective solutions to help students solve the dilemma of academic thesis writings.

**Keywords:** Graduate English Academic Writing Ability, Influence Factors, Suggestions for English Academic Teaching.

---

## 1. Introduction

Cultivating students' English application ability has always been a topic of general concern in English teaching. Especially, the cultivation of academic writing ability has become a hot and difficult issue in English teaching and research. It is found that the English academic writing ability of Chinese college students is generally low. Due to the English writing problem, more than 80% of the English papers submitted to international conferences or international journals by graduate students have been rejected. This situation seriously affects the efficiency of our graduate students to participate in international academic exchanges. Therefore, it has become an urgent problem to cultivate students' English academic paper writing ability.

Research on graduate students' academic writing ability has also attracted much attention abroad, and Hyland[1] studied the terminological habits of British and Hong Kong Chinese master's degree students in expressing qualification and affirmation of propositions in their academic essays. He found that Hong Kong students tended to be more homogeneous in their choice of words and syntactic structures, and therefore were less certain about the degree of qualification and affirmation of propositions; Hyland[2] also studied Hong Kong master's students' use of metadiscourse in their academic essays, and found that the use of metadiscourse was deficient in terms of variety and appropriateness; Huang[3] investigated the views of non-native English-speaking doctoral students on learning to write academic essays and writing in international journals, writing academic papers and publishing in international journals. Through these perceptions, he found that these students have a sense of knowing that their English is limited. However, they lacked the motivation to change the status in terms of academic writing in English, and they always believed that English was secondary to scientific research. Therefore, they were dependent on their supervisors for writing and publishing academic papers. In addition, they lack confidence in the effectiveness of academic writing courses.

In China, regarding students' academic writing ability, Ma and Wen[4] conducted a study on the factors influencing college students' English writing ability. The results showed that native language writing ability, English knowledge and

competence have a systematic impact on English writing ability. Xu and Guo[5] studied the teaching of English academic writing for non-English major doctoral students. He concluded that it is of significance for learners to develop English academic writing skills such as linguistic competence, socio-linguistic and cultural contrastive competence, competence in the use of communication strategies, and competence in chapter construction. The research made an attempt to analyze the discourse errors that appeared in the English academic papers of 66 graduate students from three universities in Chongqing. Through the study, he found that a variety of errors occurred at the discourse level of graduate students' English academic writing influenced by Chinese discourse patterns. And the proportion of discourse errors is as high as 53%, which seriously affects the quality of the thesis. Xu[5] et al. concluded that the teaching of academic essay genres is indispensable after investigating and analyzing the introduction writing of master's thesis for English majors. Tang and Fan point out from three aspects: vocabulary, sentence pattern and chapter that English academic thesis writing is influenced by native language thinking, which leads to the thesis not conforming to English expression habits. Huang [6] conducted a survey on 25 English writing textbooks for non-English major graduate students published in China from 1999 to 2008. The survey found that the current graduate English textbooks have little to do with academic English writing. Tu and Wang[11] discuss the major differences between English and Chinese modes of thinking and give examples to analyze the impact of these differences on English academic essay writing. Feng[8] uncovers the factors affecting academic English essay writing, in addition to the traditional mindset of Chinese writing, and some factors from the students' perspective. Li[16] explores the degree and expression of anxiety and the causes of anxiety in English graduate students' essay writing. And she used the results to analyze the problems in order to better help English graduate students to write higher quality academic papers. Zhu[17] points out that graduate students' English academic paper writing process has problems such as confusing structure, ignoring writing steps, and more language errors. Dong [15] compares the similarities and differences in abstract writing between native and non-native English speaking scholars from four perspectives: sequence of speech

steps, length of abstract, tense and morphology. Han[13] learned about graduate students' use of emotion regulation strategies in writing and publishing English academic papers, and explored the factors affecting the choice of emotion regulation strategies through 14 interviews.

In conclusion, it can be seen that people pay attention to students' English academic writing ability and the teaching of English academic writing courses from different perspectives. In this study, we select "Graduate Students' Academic Writing", "Dissertation Writing", "Academic Writing" and "Postgraduates' Academic Writing". Postgraduates' Academic Writing" as keywords, and searched for related papers on CNKI and Web of Science as the corpus of the study, in order to explore the problems and solutions in Chinese students' English academic writing. This study aims to offer suggestions for the current English academic writing program and proposes the following research questions to guide this systematic review:

- What types of problems exist in Chinese students' English academic writing through the literature analysis of graduate students' English academic writing?

- Based on the problems in Chinese students' English academic writing, what kind of corresponding academic writing teaching suggestions can be made?

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Search Criteria

Considering the purpose of this review, the following two groups of keywords were used in this study. The first group is keywords related to writing ability, such as native language writing ability, English knowledge and ability, discourse analysis error analysis. The second group is the keywords related to the problems associated with the influencing factors present in English academic writing, such as anxiety, native-speaker thinking, and so on. These two sets of search terms were run in combination using Boolean operators, using AND operators between sets and OR operators within sets.

### 2.2. Selection of Journals

The following journals were selected for this paper including Modern English, Foreign Languages Research, Research in Teaching, Modern Foreign Languages, Academic Degrees & Graduate Education, Journal of PLA University of Foreign Languages, Research in Higher Education of Engineering, Journal of Graduate Education, Journal of Central South University (Social Sciences).

The main reason for choosing these journals is that they are all dedicated to teaching academic English essay writing. The eight journals selected were peer-reviewed and included in the Social Science Citation Index (SSCI). Therefore, it can be assumed that almost all published works in the data used in this review are of high quality.

The significance of the specified time period (2006-2023) about the journals mentioned above is to improve the integrity of the study through a longitudinal study of two decades. With the deepening of similar research, there are more studies that need to be supplemented by subsequent researchers.

### 2.3. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

Four inclusion criteria were developed for the selection of suitable academic paper writing articles. To be included in this review, articles should fulfill the following requirements.

- Should be published in one of the eight ssci indexed

journals listed above.

- Should be dated 2006-2023 inclusive.

- Report empirical evidence of research findings on the teaching of academic essay writing.

In other words, articles were excluded if they were not published in the selected journals within the specified time period. Other types of publications such as literature reviews, position papers, book reviews, commentaries and editorials were also excluded.

## 2.4. Data Collection

The search task was conducted in December 2023 using Knowledge and Web of Science databases. All potentially relevant articles identified through the database search underwent a two-stage screening process. First, the author read through all titles and abstracts to filter out irrelevant content. As a result, 17 selected articles were systematically analyzed for this review.

## 3. Finding and Discussion

Through the findings of the study, the above screened articles can be categorized into three groups:

### 3.1. The Influence of Thinking Mode Factors on English Academic Essay Writing

Tang and Fan[9] analyze the influence of mother tongue thinking on the specific genre of Chinese scholars' academic essay writing from the perspectives of vocabulary, sentence pattern and chapter. First of all, in the process of writing English academic papers, Chinese scholars do not understand the differences between English and Chinese languages and cultures, and the different ways of thinking produced by different cultural backgrounds. Therefore, the choice of vocabulary will be influenced by the mother tongue thinking and make some mistakes. For example, the choice of tense, the choice of inflection, the use of ambiguous words and so on. Secondly, mother tongue thinking affects the choice of sentence patterns. For example, the running sentence is one of the most obvious choices. Lastly, native thinking affects the chapter, including too slow entry, coherence of the text, and so on. Tu and Wang[11] express that the decisive influence of the difference between English and Chinese thinking patterns cannot be ignored. They analyze from the perspectives of word formation and paragraphing that due to the influence of the difference between English and Chinese modes of thinking, domestic scholars often have some problems in the process of writing English academic essays. These problems include: vocabulary, inappropriate use of articles, collocation errors, and more modifiers; sentence level, tense confusion, modal abuse, etc.; and chapter level, lack of coherence and more Chinese expressions. Feng[8] summarized and analyzed the comments of British teachers on Chinese students' academic essays and classified them into the following eight categories: lack of criticality, absence of the author's personal opinion, unattributed sources or plagiarism, unsubstantiated arguments, irregular citation of literature, irrelevance of arguments and proofs, incorrect academic style, unclear presentation, and incoherent structure. The biggest factor for the above problems is the traditional education of Chinese culture.

Influenced by the mother tongue thinking, Chinese scholars often use Chinese English and express themselves in an unorthodox way in the process of writing English

academic papers. This not only has an impact on the writing level of the paper, but also creates obstacles to the understanding of foreign paper reviewers and readers. One of the most important aspects of academic paper writing is "readability". We need to make the foreign readers understand our message well.

### **3.2. The Influence of Emotional Factors on English Academic Essay Writing**

Li[16] used the "Survey on Factors Influencing English Academic Essay Writing Anxiety" compiled by Zeng Ting in 2013 based on extensive literature reading in order to find out the causes of anxiety in the students' writing process. The study concludes that the anxiety of English graduate students in writing essays is relatively high on the whole. Han[13] used a questionnaire survey based on the integrated model of emotion regulation in achievement context. He investigated the use of emotion regulation strategies in the process of writing and publishing English academic papers by 363 graduate students in China. He also explored the factors influencing the choice of emotion regulation strategies through 14 interviews. Through the analysis of the results, the study broadens the scope of emotion regulation research in second language writing, and enriches the integrated model of emotion regulation in achievement contexts in terms of subcategories of emotion regulation strategies and characteristics of academic contexts.

### **3.3. The Influence of Writing Ability on English Academic Writing**

Guo[10] found through his research that due to the strong influence of the traditional teaching mode, most students are more capable in the memorization of English grammatical knowledge and grammatical rules, in the training of reading comprehension and in test-taking ability. However, they neglected to pay attention to and cultivate their socio-linguistic and cultural contrastive skills, their ability to use communication strategies, and their ability to construct chapters, and thus their exposure to English was often only reading. Tu[11] made an attempt to analyze the discourse errors that appeared in the English academic papers of graduate students from three universities in Chongqing. Based on these discourse errors, firstly, it can be analyzed that learners receive a large degree of influence from Chinese discourse patterns when writing English academic papers. Secondly, as advanced English learners, the proportion of graduate students' errors at the discourse level of academic paper writing has reached 53%, which directly affects the quality and publication of English academic papers. Finally, through the study, the authors concluded that it is necessary for graduate students, especially those in science and engineering, to have a separate and specialized writing class. The writing courses need to be academic English writing as well as western humanities related courses. These findings are targeted to improve the students' ability to utilize the language in a comprehensive manner.

## **4. Analysis of the Reasons Affecting Chinese Students' English Academic Writing Ability**

Through the preliminary investigation of Chinese students' academic writing ability, it is found that there are many factors affecting their English academic writing ability,

mainly in the following aspects.

### **4.1. Academic Writing Learning Starts Late**

According to the survey, it is found that students in the middle and elementary school stages of our students do not receive any academic writing education, and they do not begin to contact simple academic writing until the middle and late stages of the university. For example, writing lab reports, course design closing reports, writing thesis before graduation, etc. Moreover, for non-English majors, these reports and theses are written in Chinese. In Australia, on the other hand, students' awareness of scientific research is cultivated from elementary school. For example, elementary school students are allowed to visit a sewage treatment plant in the urban area, and when they come back, they are asked to write an investigation report for each student, so that the students can state whether the layout of the plant is reasonable or not and what are the problems with it. An original method to Exercise students' independent thinking and analytical skills, and more importantly, cultivate their awareness of academic research and writing. Through the author's comparative study of Chinese and American students' writings, it is found that Chinese students differ greatly in academic writing compared with their counterparts in Europe and America. Most of the Chinese students need to attend English academic writing remedial classes, which brings a lot of trouble to Chinese students. On the contrary, students from Europe and America are very strong and experienced in academic writing. Because they start writing academic discourse at an early age, they have already mastered the skills of academic writing. Since Chinese students start late in academic writing, it is important to master English academic writing skills as soon as possible to improve their ability to participate in international academic exchanges.

### **4.2. Poor English Academic Communication Skills**

Compared with native English speakers, Chinese students encounter one more difficulty in academic writing, which is the English language problem. In contrast, Chinese students, especially non-English majors, have a much shorter time to learn English and be exposed to the English language environment. As a result, most students have a poor sense of English language and a poor English foundation. In addition, they make efforts to review English four or six levels during their university study. However, the contents of the English exams of Grade 4 and 6 are not very much connected with English academic writing, thus leading to the students' poor language application ability, especially their ability to communicate academically in English. It can be seen from the papers written by the students that they often have improper language expression and Chinese English in their papers because of the difficulty in language expression ability. This is absolutely unacceptable in international academic communication. This is also one of the reasons why many academic papers are rejected by international academic journals.

### **4.3. Little Understanding of the Genre Characteristics and Writing Norms of Academic Discourse**

Based on the abstracts, introductions and conclusions of academic papers written by students, the study found that students knew nothing about the genre characteristics of

academic discourse, the culture of the subject area, and the academic writing norms recognized in the subject area. This is one of the reasons why Chinese students' academic writing is low and not up to international standards.

#### **4.4. Lack of Confidence in Their English Academic Writing Level and Participation in International Exchanges, And Dependence on Instructors**

Some students lack confidence in their English proficiency and participation in international academic exchanges, thinking that it is something out of reach. Therefore, they put their hope of writing English academic papers and publishing them in international academic journals on their instructors, hoping that the instructors will help them to publish international papers.

#### **4.5. Poor Cross-Cultural Communication Skills**

For Chinese students, English academic papers are cross-cultural academic communication in the form of written language. In other words, it is communication and information exchange across Chinese and English language and culture. It is necessary to consider both the differences in language and culture, as well as the forms of linguistic expressions that are accepted by the culture of this subject area internationally. In addition, it is necessary to consider the requirements for language expression of academic papers in terms of their stylistic features. These are knowledge that Chinese students know little or even nothing about.

### **5. Some Suggestions for Current Academic Writing Teaching**

Based on the above investigation and analysis, the author puts forward the following suggestions for improving the teaching of the current English academic writing course.

#### **5.1. Teaching Content**

Change the previous practice of simply teaching academic writing skills and increase the content of teaching. The content includes the stylistic features and writing norms of academic discourse, the cultures and statutes of different disciplinary fields, cross-cultural communication and pragmatic knowledge, as well as the methods of realizing the interpersonal interaction between authors and readers in the writing of academic discourse. Students are made to fully understand the stylistic features of English academic discourse and the cultures of subject areas, and to understand the communication styles and habits of people in the community of academia. In addition, work on the improvement of English language expression skills. Students are guided to summarize, generalize and remember some programmed language expressions in English academic discourse, as well as internationally recognized, accepted and customary forms of language expression in the field of the discipline. In addition, the teaching content should include academic moral aspects in addition to intellectual content, explaining the knowledge and at the same time explaining how to avoid plagiarism and other academic misconduct.

#### **5.2. Teaching Program**

We should learn from the advanced experience of western countries and arrange this course earlier. Starting from

undergraduates, English academic writing class should be offered from shallow to deep, so that students can contact and learn English academic writing earlier. Because the cultivation of English academic writing ability is a long-term process of learning and practicing, which can't be obtained by a course of twenty or so credit hours.

#### **5.3. Aspects of Teaching Form**

##### **5.3.1. Adopt Small Classes**

At present, the English academic writing class mainly adopts the lecture form of attending a large class, which is very unfavorable to the implementation of the teaching content. Due to the large number of students, it makes the interaction and communication between teachers and students difficult, and the teaching effect cannot be guaranteed. The fundamental way to solve this problem is to change to small classes.

##### **5.3.2. Adopt the Teaching Mode of Teacher-Student Interaction**

Academic essay writing is a highly targeted and applied skill, and it is difficult to make students master English academic essay writing skills purely by classroom lectures. It needs a lot of interaction and communication between teachers and students, as well as a lot of practice by students. It is only through classroom learning, after-class practice, extensive reading and writing that students can master, acquire and internalize the skills and essentials of English academic essay writing. It is only through this that students can further understand and appreciate the forms and methods of language expression in English academic essays that are decent, appropriate and accepted by the international academic community. Therefore, the teaching mode should include practicing in learning. Through the combination of teaching and practice, practicing in learning is a process of experiencing and internalizing. In order to facilitate students' access to a large amount of reading materials, we can make full use of online academic paper resources, so that students can have direct contact with the latest papers published in internationally renowned journals in the field of the discipline, and understand the language styles of the contemporary academia and the academic writing norms in the field of the discipline. In addition, combining the theories of cooperative teaching, task teaching and content-based teaching, we explore and build an English academic paper writing teaching mode suitable for the current situation of college students' academic writing. Students are encouraged to pay attention to, contact with, recognize, master, and apply the language of English academic style and use it to communicate academic ideas and scientific research results.

### **6. Conclusion**

English academic essay writing is one of the most important contents in graduate students' English education, which should not be neglected. At present, Chinese students face two major problems in English academic writing: English language and academic writing. Teachers and students should be serious about the problems in English academic essay writing and how to help students improve their English academic writing level and ability through English academic writing teaching courses. Teachers should constantly improve their own writing literacy to meet the teaching requirements. At the same time, they should also keep going to find out the problems that students have in

writing and solve them in a targeted way. The suggestions for improvement of the current English academic writing course made in this paper through investigation and analysis are positive. For instance, there is to set up collaboration between teachers and students in addressing the challenges. Teachers also need to consider discussing ways to create an interactive learning environment and so on. These suggestions have a positive contribution to the current teaching of English academic writing. However, this is only the first step to the teaching reform of the course. The author hopes that more scholars will put forward much better suggestions to improve the teaching of the course so that it can really become a classroom for cultivating international academic communication talents.

## References

- [1] Hyland K. *English for Academic Purposes* [M]. London and New York: Routledge, 2006: 163-167.
- [2] Hyland K. *Metadiscourse* [M]. London: Continuum, 2005: 16-49.
- [3] Huang Juchuan. Publishing and Learning Writing for Publication in English: Perspectives of NNES PhD Students in Science [J]. *Journal of English for Academic Purposes*, 2010, (9): 33-44.
- [4] Ma Guanghui, Wen Qiufang. Research on the Influencing Factors of College Students' English Writing Ability [J]. *Foreign Language Teaching and Research*, 1999, (4): 34-39.
- [5] Xu Youzhi, Guo Lihui, XU Tao. The Indispensability of Teaching Academic Thesis genres - A Survey of English Transfer Month Master's Thesis Introduction Writing[J]. *Chinese Foreign Languages*, 2007,4 (4): 47-51.
- [6] Huang Jianbin, Yu Shulin, Xu Ying. Analysis and Reflection on English Teaching Materials for Non-English Majors [J]. *Degree and Graduate Education*, 2009, (11): 31-34.
- [7] HAN Jinlong. Teaching English writing: A Process Genre Approach [J]. *Foreign Languages*, 2001, (4): 35-40.
- [8] Feng Lan. The Influence of "Starting and Ending" Thinking Mode on Chinese Students' Academic English Essay Writing in UK Universities[J]. *Chongqing and the World(Academic Edition)*,2015,32(07):114-118.DOI:10.13769/j.cnki.cn50-1011/d.2015.07.030.
- [9] Tang Jinchan,Fen Weiwei. The Influence of Mother Tongue Thinking on English Academic Paper Writing[J]. *Research on Higher Engineering Education*,2008(S1):55-58.
- [10] Guo Q. On the Cultivation of English Academic Writing Skills of Non-English Major Doctoral Students[J]. *Degree and Graduate Education*,2006(02):52-55.DOI:10.16750/j.adge.2006.02.015.
- [11] Tu Guoyuan,Wang Hualing. The Influence of Thinking Mode Differences on English Academic Essay Writing and Countermeasures[J]. *Journal of Central South University (Social Science Edition)*,2013,19(05):238-243.
- [12] Zhong Lanfeng,Zhong Jiabao. A Study on the Current Situation and Influencing Factors of Graduate Students' Academic English Anxiety[J]. *Foreign Language Research*, 2015,32(06):56-61+112.DOI:10.13978/j.cnki.wyj.2015.06.011.
- [13] Han Ye,Xu Yueting,Li Bampan et al. A Study on Emotion Regulation Strategies in Graduate Students' Academic Paper Writing and Publishing Situations[J/OL]. *Modern Foreign Languages*:1-12[2023-12-25].<https://doi.org/10.20071/j.cnki.xdwy.20231027.003>.
- [14] Lu Huiqiang. Discourse Error Analysis of Graduate Students' Academic English Writing [D]. Chongqing University,2008.
- [15] Dong Juncai. A Comparative Study of Abstract Writing in Academic Papers of Native [16] Li Boyao. A study on thesis writing anxiety of English graduate students[D]. Xi'an International Studies University,2018.
- [16] Zhu Haiqing. Common Problems and Countermeasures in Graduate Students' Academic English Essay Writing[J]. *Science and Technology Wind*,2020(18):57-58.DOI:10.19392/j.cnki.1671-7341.202018043.