

# The Study on “Academic Game”-Oriented English Course Model for Postgraduates in Agricultural Universities

Xinrong Xia

Language Studies College, Sichuan Agricultural University, Yaan 625014, China

E-mail: xiaxinrong33@163.com

## Abstract

Based on the analysis of the questionnaire survey on learning motivation and learning needs of postgraduates and their demands and suggestions on English teaching, the paper makes a beneficial exploration on English course model for postgraduates in agricultural universities. Under the guidance of academic game theory, the “language skills+ academic communication”-oriented English course model meets the social demands for highly qualified professionals in agriculture and forestry with comprehensive English application abilities.

**Keywords:** Postgraduate, English course model, Academic game, Comprehensive English application abilities

In recent years, with the global development in science, technology, economy and culture, postgraduates in agricultural universities are asked for more in their English comprehensive applied abilities. In addition to dealing with daily oral communication and reading relevant foreign materials, they are also expected to deliver speeches on academic topics and write academic essays. English is not only a compulsory course for postgraduates in agricultural universities but an inevitable tool for their scientific researches and academic communication. However, influenced by China’s examination-oriented education for a long term and the omission of listening in recent years’ postgraduate entrance examination, there are only a few number of postgraduates who can read original works and journals related to agriculture and forestry or have fluent dialogues in English. Besides, in postgraduate English teaching, importance is still attached to college English instead of combining English with relevant majors, hence discouraging a large number of students who desire to achieve greater development in their specialized fields through English learning.

English comprehensive applied ability is an important element to determine whether postgraduates in agriculture and forestry are able to make full use of English literature to improve essay quality, to promote the internationalization of essay publication and academic communication and to enhance comprehensive scientific and technological quality. Therefore, it is an urgent issue how to explore an English education model accustomed to the current postgraduate scale and social demands in order to cultivate advanced professionals in agriculture and forestry with solid English capacity, able to use English to have specialized studies and researches and to explore and innovate academic culture as well as with the abilities to have intercultural academic communication.

## 1. Current Situation and Tendency of Domestic and Foreign Researches

It has become the key to postgraduates’ English education to cultivate postgraduates’ abilities in independent research and practice. Gengshen Hu (1998) puts forward with the teaching model of “language + communication” to cultivate students’ foreign language application skills. Jimei Xia (1998) proposes the task teaching method to combine language ability objectives and work ability objectives to cultivate students’ abilities in applying language, finding and solving problems and cooperating with others. In The Basic Requirements for Postgraduate English Teaching established at the National Seminar for Foreign Language Teaching of Postgraduates in 2005, it is pointed out that postgraduate English teaching is ultimately intended to cultivate students’ abilities in study and research in their own majors with English as a language tool and postgraduate English teaching should be based on demands to improve postgraduates’ English capacity, especially their oral and written communication ability in their own or relevant majors through a variety of methods and channels. According to Ye Gu (2008), postgraduate English learning should be combined with specialized courses, so are language learning and culture learning. All these clarify the orientation of the model for specialized postgraduates’ English education, that is, centering on students and combining language and majors in order to cultivate students’ practical language capacity.

In the recent decade, with the extensive use of the computer and network hardware in English teaching, great changes have taken place in domestic and foreign teaching theories, among which constructivism and humanistic psychology are quite influential. It is emphasized in constructivism that students should be centered on and

converted from passive recipients of external stimulation and knowledge into subjects of information processing as well as active constructors of knowledge. Human emotions and demands are emphasized in humanistic psychology, according to which, learners' spontaneous learning is the most persisting and profound one (Wu, 2006). It is these advanced teaching theories that have provided theoretical evidence for the reform in postgraduates' English teaching model, due to which relevant reform has achieved remarkable results in grasping the characteristics of English education, normalizing the cultivation process, optimizing the cultivation environment and providing supporting conditions and so on. However, there are still a lot of problems (Gui, 1997; Liu, 1999; Liu, 2000; Dai, 2007), such as 1) educational ideas, curriculum setting and teaching models relevant to postgraduates' English teaching still lie in the preliminary stage; 2) theoretical researches about the combination of relevant majors with English teaching are not scientific and systematic enough; 3) teaching evaluation and test evaluation are not reasonable enough; 4) insufficient importance has been attached to cultivating students' comprehensive quality, especially their innovative spirits and innovative abilities. Therefore, it is quite necessary to establish a pluralistic and interactive English teaching model combining English and different majors based on advanced educational ideas and learning theories during the conversion from traditional teaching to network-based teaching in order to improve postgraduates' comprehensive abilities in English application and to implement researches on innovative English education.

## **2. Investigation and Analysis on Postgraduate English Teaching**

The research on a proper model for postgraduate English education is a project of strong pertinence, which calls for profound investigation into practical performance. The main methods employed in this research include investigation, questionnaire and interview. The subject is composed of 687 postgraduate students from Grade 2008 of Sichuan Agricultural University majoring in science, engineering, agriculture, forestry and management. Some issues such as the background of postgraduates' English learning, their learning motivation, their opinions on the key points of English teaching, their suggestions on English class and relevant optional courses and so on are included. We distributed 687 questionnaires and collected 652 valid ones, accounting for 94.91% of the total. Obviously, the result of this investigation is of validity and reliability.

### *2.1 Background Information of English Learning*

It is shown in this investigation that 92.64% of the investigated postgraduate students have passed CET-4 and 70.71% of them have passed CET-6 by learning English in listening, speaking, reading and writing, which shows their good English basis and their ability of understanding general English documents.

### *2.2 Learning Motivation*

It is shown that the mainstream motivation for postgraduates' English learning is to apply what they have learnt. Most postgraduate students hope that they can implement learning and research in their majors with English as a tool, apply English to oral and written academic communication and achieve greater development in their professional fields.

### *2.3 Suggestions on Key Points in English Teaching*

As is shown in our investigation, postgraduates have high expectations and demands for listening, speaking, writing and translation, revealing their awareness of the fundamental role of literature application and oral and written communication ability in improving their comprehensive research quality.

### *2.4 Suggestions on English Class*

As is shown in this investigation, with more profound development of English learning, postgraduates attach greater importance to cultivating their English output abilities, wishing to establish their general view of language and to have effective intercultural academic communication on the platform with the interaction between English and different majors. It is of particular importance for students' future development of research abilities to grasp special English as well as strong skills and abilities of academic communication (Zou, 2004).

### *2.5 Suggestions on Optional Courses*

As is shown in this investigation, postgraduates expect to have practical language skill courses and cultural ones, to acquire more knowledge and information related to the academic development of their majors. They desire to have their learning of comprehensive language abilities and that of specialized knowledge combined, hence strengthening the cultivation of their English application ability, intercultural communication ability, academic communication ability as well as cultural innovation ability.

## **3. Critical Issues in Improving the English Capacity of Postgraduates Majoring in Agriculture and Forestry**

Postgraduates' demands and suggestions on English teaching give a hint that it should become the key to college

English teaching reform to improve postgraduates' English capacity and to enhance their academic communication ability (Guo, 2006). The reform in postgraduate English education in agricultural universities can be implemented in the following aspects:

### *3.1 Setting pluralistic Curriculum System with the Cultivation of English Application Ability as the Key Link*

Different levels including basic theories, language skills and research methods should be taken into full consideration in postgraduate course setting to achieve a pluralistic fusion of educational contents (Dai, 2005). Therefore, the fundamental idea of "English being a useful tool to expand specialized academic space" should be followed in the curriculum setting for postgraduate English in agricultural universities to give prominence to their specialties in agriculture and forestry and to closely combine language skills and specialized courses. For example, some compulsory and optional courses with special characteristics of agriculture and forestry should be provided including scientific English essay writing specialized in agriculture and forestry, simulated international conferences, agriculture and forestry document reading in order to cultivate postgraduates' comprehensive English capacity, their innovative abilities in academic culture and their intercultural academic communication abilities.

### *3.2 Constructing a Pluralistic and Interactive Teaching Model of "Language + Communication" with Academic Game as the Guideline*

In agricultural postgraduates' English teaching, specialized agriculture and forestry knowledge should be based on to construct an interactive "language + communication" teaching pattern, to combine foreign language capacity with foreign communication practice, and therefore to accomplish academic game through the conflicts and cooperation in free explorations and academic communication (Jin, 2008) with the goal to stimulate students' innovative potentials and to cultivate their academic research and innovation abilities. For instance, teachers may consciously create an individualized, cooperative, modular and hyper-textual learning environment with specialized contents as the core (Hu, 2004) to guide postgraduates to have exploratory learning on certain topics according to their interest and curricular requirements, to encourage them to present essays and have seminars on some issues at simulated academic conferences in order to cultivate students' foreign language application skills, to exercise their ability of giving presentations, writing essays and intercultural academic communication.

### *3.3 Establishing Scientific Evaluation Model and Index System to Evaluate Agriculture and Forestry Postgraduates' English Application abilities*

A scientific teaching effect evaluation system will effectively stimulate and evaluate the effects of teaching and learning, improve postgraduates' humanistic and scientific qualities (Gu, 2008). Currently, a series of reasonable quality evaluation index systems have been established in China's degree and graduate English education, which have exerted an important role in the evaluation and monitoring of postgraduate English education quality. However, since relevant index systems are based on experience, single index is chosen with great random and the whole system is lacking of systematic organization or framework for reasonable analysis. Accordingly, agricultural universities are expected to establish a logic frame based on which an evaluation index system for postgraduates' English education and a scientific and reasonable test system can be formed in four dimensions including material input, the construction of instructor staff, cultivation supervision and external evaluation to have test and analysis on the practical application of the "language skills+ academic communication" model and provide theoretical evidence for it as well.

## **4. Conclusion**

Postgraduate education holds the responsibility to cultivate high-quality and high-level innovative professional talents for China's construction (Liu, 2007). Based on relevant analysis and research on postgraduates' English learning motivation, learning needs, their demands and suggestions on English teaching and taking some critical issues related to the improvement of agricultural postgraduates' English application abilities into consideration, we had positive explorations into the model for the course reform of postgraduate English with the guidance of advanced linguistic and educational theories in order to combine language learning with that of specialized knowledge, hence cultivating advanced talents in agriculture and forestry with strong comprehensive English capacity and abilities to satisfy social demands. The key to this systematic project lies in setting a pluralistic curriculum system with the cultivation of English application ability as the key line, constructing a pluralistic "language+ communication" interactive teaching model with academic game as the guideline, constructing scientific evaluation model and index system to evaluate agriculture and forestry postgraduates' English application abilities. We bear the hope that our explorations into such a model for the course reform in agricultural postgraduates' English teaching based on "language skills + academic communication" and guided

by academic game will offer theoretical and practical evidence for postgraduates' English education, normalize the cultivation process, optimize the cultivation environment and provide supporting conditions in order to produce postgraduates who have solid English application abilities to have specialized learning and researches with English as a tool, hence becoming high-quality complex talents with intercultural academic communication abilities and cultural innovation abilities.

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Table 1. Background information of postgraduates' English learning

	The number of students passing the test	Percentage (%)
CET-4	604	92.64
CET-6	461	70.71

Table 2. Postgraduates' learning motivation

	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Practical language application ability	335	51.38
Career demands	213	32.67
CET-6	23	3.53
Degree	31	4.75
Going abroad	9	1.38
Self-interest	41	6.29

Table 3. Postgraduates' Suggestions on Key Points in English Teaching

	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Listening & Speaking	412	63.19
Writing	83	12.73
Reading	31	4.75
Translation	106	16.26
Vocabulary & Grammar	5	0.77
Culture & Literature	9	1.38
Examination	6	0.92

Table 4. Postgraduates' Suggestions on English Class

	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Increasing chance for listening and speaking practice	458	70.25
Increasing foreign teachers' class hours	201	30.83
Simulating academic conferences	332	50.92
Enhancing teacher-student interaction	63	9.66
Giving classes in English	42	6.44

Note: this result is got by summarizing students' comments.

Table 5. Postgraduates' Suggestions on Optional English Courses

	Number of students	Percentage (%)
Video, listening and speaking	506	77.61
Reading and translation of special English	382	58.59
English for international conference s	156	23.31
English science essay writing	128	19.63
Selective reading of professional journals	231	35.43
European and American culture	78	11.96

Note: this result is got by summarizing students' comments.