

A Study on Chinese Learners' Acquisition of EAP Writing Competence^{*}

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It has been proved ineffective to teach academic English by explaining its features in the traditional academic English class. The process of RA (research article) writing is a process of creating new knowledge. Academic English is the media to express academic thoughts in RAs. Learners can acquire academic English through involvement in process of creating new knowledge in completion of RA writing task. Two different classroom teaching designs were adopted to test the proposed hypothesis. The control class adopted analytical explanation method; while the experimental class adopted process-centered, theme-oriented, and inquired-based approach. The experimental class received immediate feedback on meaning and mini-training sessions on language problems. Results showed that the experimental class mastered both low- and high- level skills of academic English, while the control class mastered most of the low-level skills. This indicates that students can acquire academic English by experiencing creation of new knowledge.

Keywords: academic English, EAP (English for academic purposes) writing, creating new knowledge

Introduction

Since the 1980s, how EFL (English as a foreign language) learners acquire academic English has been the research focus of writing researchers and teachers. Scarcella (2003) defined academic English as “a variety or register of English used in professional books and characterized by the linguistic features associated with academic disciplines” (p. 9). Chamot and O'Malley (1994) defined it as: “The language that is used by teachers and students for the purpose of acquiring new knowledge and skills... imparting new information, describing abstract ideas, and developing students' conceptual understanding” (p. 40). The teaching goal of academic English for Chinese undergraduate English-majors is to prepare them for writing B.A. (Bachelor) theses or conducting research in English in their future studies. Therefore, academic English in the present study refers to the language used in English academic papers. The target audience for RAs (research articles) includes the scholars in academic discourse community; therefore academic language should meet the expectations of readers and authors in academic community.

The course of English RA writing has been set up for senior undergraduate English-majors in most universities in China aiming at preparing students for B.A. thesis writing. However, research on RA writing classroom teaching practices is still at the beginning stage in China, and the outcomes of RA writing teaching are far from satisfactory. It is commonly believed that the obstacles of students in writing RAs are concerned

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with the rhetorical, organizational, and linguistic characteristics of RAs. The textbooks of how to write RAs for undergraduate English-majors mainly explain the linguistic features and discourse structures of RAs, or some rudimentary research skills such as collecting source materials, note taking, drafting, and revising (e.g., CHENG & QI, 2005; HUANG, GE, & ZHANG, 2006). In the traditional English RA writing classroom teaching, instructors always limit themselves to the introduction of research and writing skills, such as library research, documentation styles, and formatting techniques, without assigning real RA writing tasks. Nevertheless, study shows that when writing their B.A. theses, a considerable number of English-major learners have difficulty in understanding requirements, finding references, and expressing complex ideas in formal written English, and they do not find the writing process rewarding (SUN, 2004). What is more, the overall quality of English RA writing of English-majors in China is generally low, and plagiarism is often found in their RAs (ZHU, 2003). This phenomenon is not merely caused by the students' inadequate language proficiency. An important reason is that students have not really understood the social communicative purposes of RAs. The primary communicative purpose of RAs is to contribute new knowledge to a certain research field by supporting an idea or providing a solution to one certain problem, or by proposing a new thought, with the researchers in the academic discourse community as the target audience.

This approach is based on the assumption that language development occurs when learners have a conscious understanding of the elements of language and they make these understandings automatic through practice (Krashen, 2011). Krashen (2011) described this kind of traditional approach as "a hopeless endeavor" (p. 382), because only a few of the most basic aspects of academic language can be consciously learned. The discourse and grammar of academic language are quite complex and challenging for the professional readers to understand, let alone students. Even if students were able to learn the complex rules, there is not a complete description of academic language, since academic research is ever-changing and so does the language describing it.

How can EFL learners acquire academic English?

If students' difficulties lay in the styles and linguistic features of RAs, and the teachers explain the organizational structures in class, why cannot students acquire academic English? Even plagiarism is found in their RAs. It proves that regarding academic English as a special kind of language and studying it on the surface level cannot solve the problem. Since the aim of RA is to convey message, the linguistic choices depend on the expression of meaning in academic context. Academic English competence is a kind of generic competence, i.e., choosing the appropriate genre in some specific discipline-related discourse to perform communicative functions. Students usually fail to understand the communicative functions of RAs, which is to contribute new knowledge to the academic community through reasoning or proposing new solutions to some problems. Snow and Uccelli (2009) emphasized that linguistic features of academic English must be coordinated with three additional cognitive accomplishments: genre mastery, command of reasoning/argumentative strategies, and disciplinary knowledge. Thus, academic English cannot be acquired by studying linguistic features. It needs to be grasped in the process of academic research. Teachers in the traditional classroom fail to realize that RA writing is the process of producing and creating new knowledge. Academic English is the representation and realization of the creation of new knowledge.

RA Writing Competence and Creation of New Knowledge

Academic language is closely related to the methods and process of obtaining knowledge, because academic paper should reflect the process of producing and creating new knowledge, such as asking research

questions, analyzing data, obtaining results, i.e., new ideas. The value of RA in academic community is that it is the main media to present new knowledge.

Ballard and Clanchy (1997) (as cited in Paltridge et al., 2009, pp. 3-4) discussed attitudes to knowledge and approaches at different levels of study. Non-academic writing focuses on correctness and simple originality, whereas academic writing focuses on creative originality and the creation of new knowledge. In RA writing, students move from summarizing and describing information to questioning, judging, and recombining information, to a deliberate search for new ideas, data, and explanations in their academic writing. Higher levels of study still expect correctness and the synthesis of information, however. At the same time, they also often expect the creation of new knowledge and a search for new evidence and interpretations. RA is the media of constructing knowledge and negotiating opinions, in which writers integrate, analyze, and respond to those opinions.

Theoretical Hypothesis

How can EFL learners acquire academic English competence in classroom setting? Based on the above analysis, we propose a hypothesis: Academic English competence is acquired through experiencing the process of creating new knowledge. That is to say, students can acquire academic English competence through participating in the stages of RA writing such as designing research objective, designing instruments, collecting data, analyzing data, and writing reports.

Method

The present study intends to answer these two research questions: (1) Can students acquire academic English through the process of creating new knowledge?; and (2) To what extent can students acquire academic English through the traditional method and the new method?.

This study was conducted from 2009 to 2011. Both experimental group and control group were senior students in English Department from a university in Shanghai. These two groups of students were not of the same grade due to the field constraints on time, teachers, and other resources, but they were advanced EFL learners with similar English proficiency. The passing rate of TEM (test for English major) 8 of the experimental group was 92.9%, while 92.6% of the control group. Neither of these two groups had practical RA writing experiences. A teacher with over 30 years' experience of foreign language teaching and research taught both two groups.

In the control group, the teacher adopted the traditional approach to RA writing, spending two weeks introducing the discourse structures and language features of RAs. He also explained how to write working plan, theoretical guidelines, questionnaire designing, data analysis, and report. One published RA written by the teacher was used as a sample to study. The teacher only gave feedback on their working plans. The following RA writing assignments including questionnaires and reports were written by students themselves.

In the experimental group, the teacher adopted process-oriented and inquiry-based teaching method. Students were required to revise their drafts several times according to the teacher's written feedback. Students developed their RA writing ability through the process of learning to write research plans, questionnaires, outlines, and reports. There was abundant interaction and negotiation in the completion of these writing tasks between teacher and students, and among students themselves.

Table 1 shows the different teaching designs of these two groups.

Table 1

Different Teaching Designs of Class A and Class B

	Experimental group	Control group
Time	The fall semester of 2009-2010 academic year	The spring semester of 2010-2011 academic year
Teaching hours	4 hrs x 19 wks = 76 hrs	4 hrs x 19 wks = 76 hrs (In the first 12 weeks, the teacher gave lectures, and in the rest seven weeks students completed their RA writing tasks.)
Teaching content	Four units	Two units
RA writing assignments	Four research projects	One research project
Teaching pedagogy	(1) Providing sample RA (2) Process-centered (3) Giving feedback at each stage of the writing process (4) Providing mini-training sessions concerning language problems	(1) Providing sample RA (2) Product-centered (3) Explaining the structure of Ras (4) No feedback except the research plan

Teaching Design of the Experimental Group

In view of the students' previous writing experiences and future writing needs, several specific instructional objectives are perceived to be integral to the overriding curricula goal:

Students should be able to perform the following tasks in English: (1) drafting a viable working plan; (2) expressing purpose, objective, and theorization of hypothesis usually found in the social studies; (3) designing and describing research instruments; (4) explaining the framework of analysis; (5) phrasing research questions; (6) reporting data; (7) describing statistics; and (8) addressing the research questions with evidence garnered from the statistics or other evidence of the data.

The aim of the writing tasks is to let students participate all the stages of academic research, including understanding background information, asking research questions, designing questionnaires and interviews, collecting data, interpreting data, presenting opinions, and evaluating the previous studies. Students study the research conducted by several scholars on one particular theme, and carry out research in groups. The procedures of the teaching design and the roles of teacher and students are described in Table 2, taking Unit 5 of Book 5 as an example.

Mini-training session is the exercise designed for solving problems concerning research skills and language difficulties. Example 1 is the research objectives written by one group.

Example (1) Research objectives

Find out how our classmates or friends make decisions on the purchase of clothes.

Find out to what extent the decision making on buying clothes is related to student's living standard and personal needs in a social context.

Find out potential problems in university students from the reflection of the report.

In Example 1, these research objectives are vague. Readers could not figure out from what aspects the research group would investigate students' purchase habits, and what the social factors were. Moreover, "potential problems in university students" was an unclear objective.

Table 3 is the mini-training session designed by the teacher. The classroom discussion questions include: (1) the components of research objectives; (2) the relationship between reader and author which was reflected from research objectives; and (3) research methodology which should be reflected or implied in research

objectives. The questions for classroom discussion were intended to direct the students' thinking and research ability. Once the functions of each part of the project report were identified, recurring patterns of discourse provided by the teacher would help students express the functions in the formal academic genre.

Table 2

The Roles of Teacher and Students in the Teaching Procedures

Activities and tasks for students	Teacher's strategies and responses
Reading and discussing the articles and relevant excerpts on the selected theme in the textbook: (1) Clothes and culture; (2) Views by scholars; And (3) RA: clothes and identity. Tasks for inquiry: A mini-research task— <i>How do college students select and purchase clothes?</i>	Introducing the basic knowledge about social science research Teaching about the concepts of fashion, gender and identity, related social, cultural, and historical aspects, changing norms Discussing the method through which knowledge about social and cultural norms of fashion was created in the articles for study Teaching necessary vocabulary, phrases for talking about cultural studies of fashion
Writing working plans (on the group basis) for an investigation into the social, cultural, and economical constraints on the norms of fashion among college students	Feedback to the student's design, framework, and feasibility Making suggestions for revision Helping students select appropriate theories for guiding their investigations Providing exemplars and mini-training sessions for discourse patterns and syntactic structures, and necessary vocabulary
Design instruments (on the basis of group work of semi-structured interviews in the pilot studies carried out by the students)	Feedback to the student's design and their pilot studies, coverage, and consideration of the quantity and types of data needed to answer their research questions Making suggestions about revision Providing exemplars and mini-training sessions for pragmatic features, discourse patterns, and linguistic features needed for a questionnaire
Using the instrument of the students' design for investigations Writing research proposals based on the data collected	Feedback to the preliminary findings based on the use of the instruments Making suggestions for revision or encouraging students to carry out the investigation again based on the revised design Explaining academic norms and conventions Providing exemplars and mini-training sessions in academic conventions, discourse patterns, and frequently used sentence patterns and vocabulary
Data collection and analysis	Feedback to student's findings based on their analysis, and data presentations Teaching conventions for reporting data, and presenting discussion Providing exemplars and mini-training sessions for reporting data (such as data of statistics) and presenting interpretations of data through discussion
Writing research reports	Feedback to the whole paper about structures, focus, and the cohesion and coherence Making suggestions for revision or redrafting Providing necessary suggestions for restructuring, and syntactic patterns and vocabulary

Example 2 is the revised draft with obvious improvement.

Example (2) This study intends to find out contemporary college students' consumption habits, perceptions of the fashionable clothes and how these perceptions influence their clothes purchase, and further explore the similarities and differences of their clothes purchase habits between male and female students.

Sentences in Example 1 are not complete sentences, which list several research objectives. There are not any connections among those sentences. The teacher helped students to construct knowledge framework, i.e., what should be included in expressing research objectives, as shown in Table 3. Through discussion, the

students had a rough idea about research objective, but the organization of knowledge points were still in disorder. The second step designed by the teacher helped students to organize ideas with the moves of academic discourse. Once students grasped the functions of academic discourse, they were provided with recurring discourse patterns. The design of these three steps, through which the students could experience the process of creating new knowledge, in turn facilitated the development of academic English.

Table 3

The Mini-Training Session for Research Objectives

Step 1: Students discussed these questions.	(1) How do you express a research objective appropriately? (2) Who will be your reader? And what does he/she expect to read? (3) How do you incorporate information about your research method into your objective statements?
Step 2: Students discussed the four moves which constitute a framework of describing research objectives.	(1) Defining the territory of the study. (2) Giving background information of the study. (3) Introducing research objectives. (4) Discussing the academic significance of your study.
Step 3: The teacher provided students recurring discourse patterns.	This study aims at finding out ... through an investigation into ... According to ..., ... Our observations show ... We would like to explore ...and answer the question(s) through this project.

Findings and Discussion

The reports written by these two groups were analyzed from two aspects: (1) moves of academic discourse (Hartley, 2008) (see Table 4); and (2) scientific thinking reflected in reports (see Table 5). The number in Tables 4-5 refers to the number of groups which the corresponding items are found in their reports.

From Table 4, it can be seen that experimental group was able to write the moves of academic discourse. Control group did not find a gap in the previous research to establish a niche, nor raise research questions. That made research focuses vague. In Discussion sections, they only presented facts, without evaluating the findings by associating with previous studies.

The major problems of control group lie in theoretical guidelines and synthetic reasoning. They reviewed some previous research on pedagogical content knowledge, but they did not find any theoretical support for their research. Nor did they build the link between the literature reviewed and their own research. In "Results" section, participants of Class B failed to present the data effectively. Two groups put the questionnaire and interview questions directly in "Results" section, which should be put in the appendix. Four groups listed the numbers of respondents who chose the choices in the questionnaire, without any further discussion.

Experimental group demonstrated better scientific thinking, such as in synthetic reasoning. They had more chances to get the teacher's feedback, and such feedback could help students to clarify concepts and construct scientific thinking and reasoning. The process of creating new knowledge based on the interaction between teacher and students improved students' language output.

Even some scientific thinking items were identified in both groups' reports, the language quality was different. The sentence structures, lexical choices and coherence in experimental groups' reports were better than control group. Examples 3-4 are the "solution generating", i.e., "decide on the research method, decide on the target group, design the questionnaire" parts written by control group and experimental group respectively.

Table 4

"Moves" Found in Two Groups' Reports

IMRAD (introduction, method, results, and discussion)			Class A (N = 7) Project 4	Class B (N = 7) Report
Introduction	Move 1: establishing a research territory	(1) By showing that the general research area is important, central, interesting, problematic, or relevant in some way (optional)	7	7
		(2) By introducing and reviewing items of previous research in the area (obligatory)	7	7
	Move 2: establishing a niche	By indicating a gap in the previous research, raising a question about it or extending previous knowledge in some way (obligatory)	7	4
	Move 3: occupying the niche	(1) By outlining the purposes or stating the nature of the present research (obligatory)	7	6
		(2) By listing research questions or hypotheses to be tested (optional)	5	3
		(3) By announcing the principal findings (optional)	0	1
Method	(1) Participants		7	7
	(2) Measures		7	2
	(3) Procedures		7	7
Results	Move 1: reporting the major results derived from the data		7	7
	Move 2: reporting the subsidiary results derived from the data		1	0
Discussion	Move 1: stating the findings to answer explicitly the research questions		7	6
	Move 2: evaluating how the results fit in with the previous findings—do they contradict, qualify, agree, or go beyond them?		5	0
	Move 3: listing potential limitations of the study		7	2
	Move 4: offering an interpretation/explanation of these results and ward off counter-claims		7	7
	Move 5: stating the implications and recommend further research		7	1

Table 5

The Incidence of STR (Scientific Thinking and Reasoning) Found in Two Groups' RAs

STR		The representation of STR in RA writing	Class A (N = 7) Project 4	Class B (N = 7) Report
Defining the key concepts		Define the key terms	5	4
Problem formulation and solution	Constructing a representation	Understand the research topic, find the problem space	7	6
		Formulate the research question		
	Solution generating	Decide on the research method	7	7
		Decide on the target group		
		Design the questionnaire		
Theory conceptualization		Literature review	7	7
		Theoretical guidelines	7	0
Hypothesis testing		Test a theory or hypothesis	7	0
Statistical reasoning		Statistical analysis	7	6
Causal reasoning		Analyze the causal relationships among variables	7	5
Inductive reasoning		From the observed to the unobserved	7	7
Deductive reasoning		From the general to the specific	7	7
Synthetic reasoning		Addressing the research questions with evidence garnered from the statistics or other evidence of the data	7	0

Example (3) This research will be conducted through questionnaires and interviews. We will select 20 interviewees and 30 respondents from English major seniors at random for the interviews and the questionnaires respectively. All questionnaires were returned.

In this small-scaled research, it's not realistic to use standard test, which is demanding in fund, time, and personnel, to acquire necessary data. So we wisely choose the common methods of questionnaire and interview to measure the changes of respondents' psychological status after 4-year pre-service education.

Example (4) Our research team adopted the questionnaire as the method to carry out our research. The reason we chose questionnaire as our research method lies in two points. Firstly, a questionnaire can provide us with comparatively objective responses because respondents' answers will be dealt with in a scientific way. Secondly, a questionnaire is a quick and convenient method to acquire the particular information we need in a limited period of time. Our questionnaires were distributed to 10 teachers in the English Department at X University in January 2010. The questionnaire for the respondents required that they provide their general opinions about their job. Our research team retrieved the questionnaires immediately after our respondents completed them. In this way, 100% questionnaires were returned.

For the method of analysis, we first worked out the proportion of each chosen option, through which respondents' preference would be shown obviously. We also put the data into tables according to teachers' different situation so as to have comparison between teachers in different groups. Then, we began our investigation by analyzing the data and writing a draft according to the analysis. At last, a report was completed based on the analysis and the conclusion we drew from it.

Examples 3-4 all described the instruments and rationale. Example 3 lacked academic rigor, for example, "it's not realistic to use standard test, which is demanding in fund, time, and personnel, to acquire necessary data. So we wisely choose the common methods..." was a kind of explanation with the teacher as the target audience. While Example 4 could explain the rationale for choosing this instrument: "Firstly, a questionnaire can provide us with comparatively objective responses because respondents' answers will be dealt with in a scientific way. Secondly, a questionnaire is a quick and convenient method to acquire the particular information we need in a limited period of time". Moreover, Example 4 also explained how to analyze the data.

Analysis of the two groups' reports shows that experimental group can better acquire academic English than control group, through experiencing the process of creating new knowledge. Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, and Krathwohl (1956) identified six levels within the cognitive domains. The lower three levels involve knowledge, comprehension, and application. The higher three levels are analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. The traditional method can only let students acquire low-level skills of academic English, while the new method can let students acquire both low-level and high-level skills of academic English.

Control group's reports could not meet the expectations of academic community both from discourse structures and reasoning strategies. Students in control group were able to grasp those moves that required mere description, but they could not grasp those moves demanding analytical thinking. They could outline the purposes or state the nature of the present research, could describe participants and procedures, could state the main findings in order in "Results" section, and could restate the findings and accomplishments in "Discussion" section. They did not know how to establish a research territory, and occupy the niche in "Introduction" section; they did

not describe the measures in "Method" section, which showed how the researchers were going to analyze the data in order to get the answers to the research questions; and they did not evaluate the results, list the potential limitations of the study, and state the implications and recommend further research in Discussion section.

Experimental group could acquire high-level skills both on scientific thinking and discourse structures. They were able to find the theoretical support based on previous studies, explain results, and answer research questions based on findings. Teacher's feedback on the discourse level and mini-training sessions targeted at language problems can improve students' RA writing as novice researchers, which facilitates students' acquiring of academic language. In the traditional classroom teaching, teacher's feedback is mainly about spelling and language forms, ignoring structure, meaning and reader awareness. The teacher in this study gave feedback on content and communicative functions of discourse, which improved students' research skills and language skills. Example 5 is the first draft of "Introduction" part written by one group from experimental group.

Example (5) Introduction

Introducing the background and the purpose of our research and the reason why we choose questionnaire as the method of this research.

We altogether distributed ten questionnaires and took all of them back.

The language in Example 5 is simple, lacking demonstrating how new knowledge was generated. Example 6 is the teacher's written feedback.

Example (6) What is the theoretical guide for your study? How do you relate what we read about the theories of education in the textbook to your research here? How do you analyze your data according to the theories we studied in class? You need a special paragraph to introduce the methodology for your study. Explain how you are going to carry out the study under the above theory. And then, you need to introduce your questionnaire, and the procedures of selecting respondents.

The teacher's feedback in Example 6 helped students construct knowledge in Introduction part, i.e., what knowledge points should be presented, what the relationship among those knowledge points were. The teacher's feedback improved students' cognitive abilities and research skills, and language abilities as well.

Example 7 is the revised Introduction, from which it can be seen that students were able to organize those knowledge points. The improvement of cognitive ability enriched their academic language.

Example (7) (1) Background

(a) Recent years, many media have reported that some students who have great performances in exams turn out to be a failure in practical affairs. More and more people are questioning the current talent-selecting system.

(b) The rate of suicide has gone up all the way these years. It shows that students' psychological qualities are decreasing. The main reason of these incidents is ascribed to the heavy burden brought by the Entrance Exam.

(c) "Lighten the burden and increase the efficiency of learning" is a slogan that can be found in every school. It remains as a question whether that measure is effective if the Entrance Exam is still in force.

(2) Theoretical guideline

(a) Productive educational change roams somewhere between over control and chaos (Pacale, 1990). There are fundamental reasons why controlling strategies don't work. The underlying

one is that the change process is uncontrollably complex and in many circumstances “unknowable” (Stacey, 1992). The solution lies in better ways of thinking about, and dealing with, inherently unpredictable processes.

(b) According to Dewey, “... Education is that ... reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience, and which increases ability to direct the course of subsequent experience.”

(c) Ralph Waldo Emerson holds that one day education shall supersede the role of politics.

Conclusions

Analysis of these two approaches shows that students can acquire academic English through experiencing the process of creating new knowledge. The traditional method can demonstrate how the elements of academic discourse are realized in the real writing, providing models for study. However, this approach can only let students acquire the low-level parts in academic English. Teacher's feedback at discourse level and mini-training session plays the role of scaffolding and improving students' cognitive ability and research skills, which in turn enrich their thinking and language.

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