

On the Teaching Design of Graduates' EAP Course: Enhancing Language Proficiency and Critical Thinking Skills

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This paper explores the integration of the bridge-in, objectives, pre-assessment, participatory activities, post-assessment and summary (BOPPPS) teaching model within the context of the post-graduates Academic English course. It discusses how this structured approach can effectively enhance students' language proficiency, foster critical thinking skills, and align with the multifaceted objectives of advanced English language education. The study provides a detailed examination of each BOPPPS component as applied to the post-graduates Academic English curriculum, supported by theoretical underpinnings and practical implications

Keywords: Academic English course, BOPPPS teaching model, language proficiency, critical thinking, active learning

Introduction

The Academic English course is designed to equip post-graduates with the linguistic, cognitive, and discursive competencies necessary for success in higher education and professional contexts. To achieve these objectives, innovative and evidence-based teaching methodologies are essential. The bridging, objectives, pre-assessment, participatory activities, post-assessment, summary (BOPPPS) teaching model, originally developed for science education, has shown promise in promoting active learning and deep understanding across various disciplines. This paper argues that its systematic and interactive nature aligns well with the needs of an academic English course, addressing both language acquisition and the development of critical thinking skills.

Needs-Analysis

The graduates' English for academic purposes (EAP) course focuses on Academic English skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It is the compulsory English course in our university's graduates' curriculum. The participants of the course are the first-year non-English major postgraduates. Above 80% of them have passed CET-6. The course prepares them for further study and research. How can we conduct our teaching effectively? Does the teaching design meet with students' learning needs?

Before composing the syllabus of the English for general academic purposes (EGAP) course, we have conducted investigations and interviews on the university's and supervisors' academic requirements for non-English major graduates. We've found that the graduates of our university are required to issue at least two research papers in international academic journals and attend academic lectures and conference. But most of the students only took general English courses in their undergraduate study, so they have the present learning needs

of Academic English skills in order to succeed in their academic careers. Typically, they need to use language in the following situations: lectures, seminars, tutorials, group projects, practical sessions, private study, and examinations. In these situations, the language skills needed would include academic reading, writing, speaking, and listening (Gillett, 1989).

Based on the needs design, we adopt BOPPPS teaching module to design the teaching in order to effectively conduct the teaching and learning process.

Teaching Philosophy and Teaching Design

EAP Course Design Based on Postgraduates Pedagogy

In recent years, with the release of the “Double First-Class” Construction Guidance Plan of Chinese Higher Education, postgraduate education plays an increasingly important role in the cultivation of compound and international talents for scientific research and technical innovation. Different from undergraduate teaching, whose direct purpose is to prepare undergraduates' future work or to further their study in graduate schools, postgraduate pedagogy shares some similarity with andragogy which focuses on satisfy the learners' learning needs for solving problems and immediacy of knowledge application (Knowles, 1980). Specifically speaking, as adult learners, postgraduates are most interested in learning subjects that have immediate relevance and impact to their research. Therefore, different from the exam oriented general English teaching for undergraduates, graduate English teaching should focus on satisfying students' strong needs for EAP. An efficient EAP teaching and learning process would enable them to improve their ability of using English to make academic reports, write and publish research papers, retrieve and consult research literature, and to enhance their competence of displaying research findings at international conferences, participating academic discussions in seminars. Moreover, as adult learners, postgraduates accumulate a growing reservoir of experience that becomes an increasing resource for learning. Their readiness to learn becomes oriented increasingly to the developmental tasks of their research work. Thus, in practice, their learning experience and internal learning motivation require a task-based EAP course design, in which strategies such as contextual analyses, role-playing, simulations, and self-assessment are generally valuable to them.

Blended Online-Offline Teaching Model Based on Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist learning theory provides a theoretical basis for exploring the teaching mode of Academic English for the graduates. Constructivism refers to the idea that learners construct knowledge for themselves—each learner individually (and socially) constructs meaning—as he or she learns (Hein, 1991). Learning is an active process in which the learner uses sensory input and constructs meaning out of it. Learning is also a social activity in which our learning is intimately associated with our connection with other human beings, our teachers, our peers, our family, even casual acquaintances (Hein, 1991). So, the pedagogy based on constructivism requires that teachers' roles in the students own cognitive and knowledge construction processes are the facilitator, the guide as well as the lecturer. Teachers need to provide learners with the opportunity to reach authentic materials, interact with others, and construct their own world. The modern educational technologies provide us with multi-modal means for those requirements, and enable us to have efficient interaction and communication between the teacher and students (Harmer, 1991).

According to Harmer (1991), authentic materials are the texts designed for the native speakers which are real and not initially designed for language learners. The academic reading materials, e.g., Text One of Unit 5

Public Health, are such a case. Since my students are English language learners with different research fields, the text may be difficult for them to understand. Therefore, how to shadow the difficult points to scaffold their acquisition of the content and language is one of the main concerns for my design of this unit. In this case, instructors can blend the online and offline teaching by utilizing the ways of some learning app (e.g., We Learn app), graphic organizer, relevant video clips, and the virtual language lab with academic conference system to facilitate their teaching. Generally speaking, the whole text belongs to the type of popular scientific report which interprets a qualitative study and a quantitative study related with the topic of breakfast and health, so We Learn app, as a ubiquitous learning mode, assists them to overcome linguistic obstacles before class; the mind-map drawing (graphic organizer) and academic poster composition help their understanding of the research process; relevant video clips display the research subjects and the research method of field observation vividly and clearly to them in the class; the practice of delivering academic presentation in the virtual language lab reinforces their perceiving of the whole contents and facilitate them to generate their own ideas related to the topic. Besides scaffolding from the teacher, the more knowledgeable other, peers' assistance can also help their own internalization of the knowledge and development of their Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) (Vygotsky, 1978). All in all, presentations with graphic organizers, team work, and simulated academic presentations are the activities that the students would use in their present and future research field.

BOPPPS Teaching Procedures

We apply BOPPPS, a teacher-oriented and student-centered lesson planning model to design the following teaching procedures. BOPPPS is an acronym representing the various components of an active learning lesson plan: bridge-in, outcomes (or objectives), pre-assessment, participatory learning, post-assessment, and summary (OZFORD, 2018). Furthermore, guided by the BOPPPS teaching model, we adopt blended online and offline learning approaches to organize the teaching and learning activities.

Bridge-in: Establishing relevance and motivation is crucial in an academic English course. The bridge component initiates the lesson by connecting prior knowledge or personal experiences to the new learning material, thereby engaging students and fostering their investment in the topic. For instance, instructors might use authentic academic texts or real-world scenarios to contextualize grammar, vocabulary, or discourse structures being taught.

Objectives: Clearly articulating learning objectives aligned with course outcomes ensures transparency and guides students' focus. In an academic English course, these objectives could encompass mastering specific grammatical structures, expanding academic vocabulary, enhancing reading comprehension, improving writing or presentation skills, or developing critical analysis abilities. Objectives should be specific, measurable, achievable, relevant, and time-bound (SMART), enabling both instructors and learners to track progress effectively.

Pre-assessment: This stage serves as a diagnostic tool, allowing instructors to gauge students' existing knowledge and skills related to the lesson objectives. In an academic English course, pre-assessments may include quizzes, short writing tasks, or group discussions, providing valuable insights into individual strengths, weaknesses, and learning needs. This information informs instructional decisions, ensuring lessons are tailored to students' diverse levels and learning styles

Participatory activity: Participatory learning is the process of teaching the topic in a way that involves active learning and student participation. When designing the participatory activities, the instructors can take application

of information technology, situational teaching, and interactional instruction into consideration, e.g., to plan a virtual academic conference on academic topics to enable students to participate the blended on-line and off-line learning process actively. The whole process provides learners with ample opportunities to apply newly acquired knowledge and skills in meaningful contexts. In an Academic English course, this could involve structured tasks such as sentence-level grammar exercises, paragraph-level writing assignments, or whole-text analysis activities. Collaborative projects, peer feedback sessions, and simulated academic debates also facilitate the transfer of learning and the development of critical thinking skills

Post-assessment: Post-assessment is to assess students' learning effect of the whole unit. The relevant academic presentation and the writing practice of charts and diagram description are used as the homework and the means of post assessment to determine if the students achieved the outcomes. Finally, the coordinated teacher-assessment, self-assessment, and peer-assessment will be used.

Summary: The summary stage consolidates learning by reviewing key concepts, reinforcing connections, and assessing understanding. In an academic English course, instructors may lead class discussions, encourage self-reflection, or use formative assessments to gauge students' retention and application of the lesson content. Summaries also serve as an opportunity to revisit objectives, celebrate successes, and address any remaining misconceptions.

Conclusion

The integration of the BOPPPS teaching model into an academic English course offers a structured, student-centered approach that fosters language proficiency and critical thinking skills. By intentionally incorporating bridge, objectives, pre-assessment, presentation, practice, and summary stages into lesson planning and implementation, instructors can create a dynamic learning environment that promotes active engagement, deep understanding, and continuous improvement. Further research, including empirical studies, could further substantiate the effectiveness of this model in enhancing the quality of academic English instruction and student outcomes.

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