

# A Case Study on English Curriculum Design for non-English Major Graduates

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**Abstract:** *As a higher level of English teaching system in China, postgraduate English teaching is facing a comprehensive reform from teaching content to curriculum system. Based on researches of scholars on postgraduate English curriculum and teaching mode, and combined with the practice of postgraduate English teaching in our university, this paper adopts the form of questionnaire and interview to analyze and discuss the postgraduate English curriculum, teaching mode, students' needs and their English application ability. By putting forward the corresponding curriculum system construction scheme, it provides a new teaching conception and attempt for further English teaching reform in our university.*

**Keywords:** *English curriculum system, non-English major graduates, reform, teaching mode*

## 1. Introduction

To carry out postgraduate education and improve the quality of talents cultivation is not only the need of national strategy, but also the demand of local economic and social development, and it is the responsibility and mission of colleges and universities of China in the new era [1]. English is a compulsory course for postgraduate students, which plays an important role in postgraduate courses [2]. As a higher level of English teaching system in China, postgraduate English teaching is facing higher requirements, further reform and improvement in the new era. Through the study and research of the current postgraduate English curriculum system, it is helpful to establish a more scientific, reasonable and suitable for China's high-level postgraduate talents cultivation system, so as to better serve the postgraduate education in China.

## 2. Literature Review

There are many researches on the reform and thinking of the existing English curriculum system for postgraduates. For the universities that have just started to carry out postgraduate education, the construction of this system has just begun. However, for many universities that have carried out postgraduate education for many years, they have already had a relatively perfect system and rich experience. Both the research on the construction and reform of the current curriculum system plays an important role in the construction and optimization of the postgraduate English curriculum system in China.

Jing (2016) conducted a questionnaire survey on the postgraduates' views on the effect of English teaching and their own learning results [3]. By comparing the data results, the author found that the system could not meet the needs of students. The main reason lies in the outdated curriculum setting mode: emphasizing reading and writing while neglecting listening and speaking, and the English courses only last for the first semester, and with few classes. With the same problem, Fanju (2017) also mentioned that there is no significant difference between the general routine of English teaching for postgraduate students and undergraduate students [4]. In addition, Jigang (2011) held the view that most of the English textbooks for postgraduate students have been used for many years and the contents and themes need to be updated urgently [5]. At present, the postgraduate English teaching and curriculum of many universities are difficult to meet the teaching purpose required by the Ministry of Education in China: "enable students to master English as a tool for the study, research and international communication of their major".

In view of the problems in the current postgraduate English curriculum system, many scholars and universities are actively carrying out research and practicing new systems that are more in line with the

needs of students and the society at present. Li (2018) suggested to carry out the extended teaching of subject research and guided practice teaching, emphasizing the assistance of learning in practice and improving students' interest in English [6]. Suhua (2016) proposed that the curriculum system should take EAP (English for Academic Purposes) as the core, and effectively help students to carry out professional learning and research in English, to read a large number of professional materials in English, and to carry out oral or written communication [7]. Zhong (2018) put forward some suggestions for setting the curriculum system of postgraduate English from two aspects: the compulsory courses need to be focus on strengthening language skills, while the elective courses focus on academic English, which are closely related to majors, professional-oriented and pay attention to application [8].

### **3. Method**

Both qualitative research and quantitative research had been applied in this study. Qualitative research was carried out by interviews, and quantitative research was done by questionnaire. 153 non-English major postgraduates in the two grades of 2019 and 2020 in Hubei University of Arts and Science were chose to participate in the questionnaire and two of them for the interview.

The questionnaire was finish online within two days, with altogether 21 multiple choice questions and 1 open question. Two randomly selected student representatives were interviewed. In the end, 136 valid questionnaires were received, with a participation rate of 88.9%, and the interview also would provide some helpful information for deeper analysis.

The results of the questionnaire are presented in the form of percentage, which can more clearly show the views and attitudes of most of the students surveyed. The result of interview would facilitate further discussions.

### **4. Results and Suggestions**

Through the above analysis of status quo and questionnaires, combining the results and the data, and referring to the thoughts on postgraduate English teaching in relevant scholars' literature, we have made the following reflections on the current postgraduate English curriculum.

#### **4.1 Results**

##### **4.1.1 *The outdated curriculum fails to meet the needs of students***

At present, postgraduate English courses offered by many universities can not well meet the diversified needs of postgraduates.

As can be seen from the results of Question 12 of the questionnaire (See Figure 1), only 32.4% of the students in favor of "Keep the existing arrangements unchanged", while 67.6% of the students put forward their opinions on the curriculum and hoped to have various types of courses. From the feedback of students, it can be seen that the current English courses can not meet the needs of students at the postgraduate level. Students have a great demand for listening and speaking courses as well as academic writing and oral English. There should be more compulsory English visual-audio-oral courses and elective courses to meet the diverse needs of students.



Figure 1: Question 12 from the questionnaire

#### 4.1.2 The teaching content of compulsory courses fails to meet the educational objectives of postgraduates

Most of the educational objectives for postgraduates require students to be able to read English literature related to their own major proficiently, have international communication ability and comprehensive language application ability, and ultimately serve the study and development of their own major. However, for most of the postgraduate English courses, their teaching content and objectives are seriously inconsistent.

As for the reading materials, although most of them are original English texts, there are rarely professional literature, which cannot improve student's ability to read professional literature in English. According to Question 14 of the questionnaire (See Figure 2), 82.4% of the students believe that there is a strong demand for reading professional literature in English during their postgraduate study. Both the educational objectives of postgraduates and the actual needs of students highlight the requirements for the improvement of professional literature reading ability. However, the selection of reading materials at present is limited to textbooks, which fails to achieve the expected teaching objectives.



Figure 2: Question 14 from the questionnaire

### 4.1.3 Teaching mode needs to be improved

Through questionnaires and interviews, we conducted an indirect survey on the methods of postgraduate English teaching.

From the feedback of Question 8 in the questionnaire (See Figure 3), about 17% of the students think "English class is boring". In the interview, some students also mentioned about "increasing English communication in class", "hoping to improve the teaching mode in class", "teachers can carry out more thematic group discussions so that students can participate in", "not to rely solely on textbooks" and so on.

It can be seen from the results that there are still some problems in the current English teaching methods for postgraduate students, which still follow the traditional mode. Although there are some improvements, they still cannot meet the requirements of postgraduate students in English learning



Figure 3: Question 8 from the questionnaire

## 4.2 Suggestions

### 4.2.1 Reorganize the curriculum

Due to the different foundation of students, there are differences in the needs of English learning at the postgraduate level. According to the feedback of the questionnaire, some students with strong English learning ability think that there is no need for too many English classes. At the same time, there are students who want more. English curriculum with a variety of choices enables students to selectively adopt the form that meets their expectations, which is conducive to improving learning motivation and effect and gaining students' recognition [9]. Therefore, the current curriculum is in urgent need of optimization.

In order to lay a solid foundation, English courses in the first semester are better to be compulsory for all postgraduate students. Basic English courses will be the main course at this time. In addition, English visual-audio-oral courses are needed, and if possible, in charged by foreign teachers.

Elective courses in the second semester should be added to meet students' needs from multiple perspectives, so as to realize academic English teaching for postgraduate students and carry out diversified teaching. Gong, Liang and Ao (2013) also proposed that "it is a feasible way to adapt to the diversification of current graduate students' English learning objectives to set up appropriate elective courses while ensuring that the basic courses can satisfy students' needs of reading, listening and speaking" [10].

Recommended elective courses are: (1) Specialized English courses for academic communication. These courses can improve students' academic English expression ability and international communication ability, help them to pay more attention to the practical aspects of the language, and closely integrate students' own majors. (2) Professional academic English reading. It is helpful to improve students' ability to effectively use professional literature to acquire new trends in scientific research in their own field. (3) Intercultural courses. These courses are conducive to cultivating students' international thinking and vision, providing cultural support for their future academic exchanges, and

thus improving their international communication ability.

#### **4.2.2 Adjust the class schedule appropriately**

In order to realize the academic and diversified teaching of English for postgraduates, it is suggested that the English courses are better to be arranged in two semesters. The first semester is open to all postgraduate students, mainly focusing on core courses, including comprehensive English courses and English visual-audio-oral courses (or integrating these courses into comprehensive English courses), with about 108-120 classes for one semester. The second semester can be elective courses, specifically for academic communication, professional academic English reading or intercultural courses. Students can choose one of them, with about 36-42 classes for one semester.

#### **4.2.3 Improve teaching mode**

Teachers should abandon the traditional college English teaching mode, communicate more with students, and adjust their teaching methods flexibly according to the actual needs of students. Through the analysis of the questionnaire and the research results of domestic scholars, it is suggested that the following activities can be carried out in the future in postgraduate English classes. For example, teachers can design some practical teaching activities such as English presentation, and carry out more thematic group discussions to mobilize students to participate in class. Besides, with the combination of online and offline teaching, flipped classroom and other new teaching forms, teaching content can be all uploaded to the online platform that students can learn independently. Therefore, teachers can carry out more in-depth learning and rich practical activities efficiently in the offline class.

### **5. Conclusion**

English plays an important role in the postgraduate education, and it is also an important tool to assist students to improve their professional academic level and carry out international exchanges. However, college English at the undergraduate level is completely unable to meet this demand. Therefore, the quality of postgraduate English courses directly affects the overall level of postgraduate education in a university. For universities that have just started their postgraduate education, their English courses need to be optimized constantly. Although many problems and deficiencies have been found already, we still insist on continuous exploration, thinking and reform. We are committed to exploring a practical English teaching system for postgraduates, in the hope of cultivating talents in various fields that can meet the needs of the ages and have the characteristics of each university.

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