

# From General English to General Academic English : Challenges and Strategies for College English Teachers in China

Guoping An<sup>1\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Foreign Language Institute of North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei, China, No. 213 mail-box of Foreign Language Institute of North China Electric Power University, 071000

DOI: [10.36348/sijll.2022.v05i02.005](https://doi.org/10.36348/sijll.2022.v05i02.005)

| Received: 17.01.2022 | Accepted: 22.02.2022 | Published: 27.02.2022

\*Corresponding author: Guoping An

Foreign Language Institute of North China Electric Power University, Baoding, Hebei, China, No. 213 mail-box of Foreign Language Institute of North China Electric Power University, 071000

## Abstract

With the popularity of international communication and cooperation, the transformation from general English to general academic English has become an inevitable trend in college English teaching in China. The transformation poses challenges for college English teachers, including the lack of interdisciplinary knowledge, limited general academic English teaching ability and evaluation ability. Accordingly, various measures can be taken to deal with the challenges, such as expanding the interdisciplinary knowledge, establishing the teaching community and reforming the evaluation means. These strategies are intended to construct the harmonious education ecology in college to promote the transformation and development of college English teachers.

**Keywords:** General English; General Academic English; Challenges; Strategies.

**Copyright © 2022 The Author(s):** This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution **4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0)** which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.

## 1. Background information about college English teaching in China

Since the implementation of reform and opening up, China's English teaching reform has been gradually promoted in various educational stages, and it has become a consensus that college English teaching reform should be deepened to multi-level development. According to the latest edition of *College English Teaching Guide*, it puts forward three categories of courses, namely "General English Course", "English for Special Purpose Course" and "Cross-cultural Communication Course" (Wang shouren, 2016). The incorporation of general academic English into college English teaching system marks the transformation of college English teaching from general English to general academic English.

Despite the rapid development of general academic English teaching, two problems have arisen: one is that the existing general academic English teaching is based on the direct or indirect replication of the British model which lack theoretical innovation for Chinese conditions; the other is that the training and certification are still in its infancy in terms of teachers'

training and development. With the deepening of academic English teaching, it is urgently needed a set of standards to guide teachers (Cai Jigang, 2017).

Therefore, colleges and universities need to take effective measures to improve the professional level of college English teachers in order to tackle the challenges of general academic English teaching.

## 2. The differences between general English teaching and general academic English teaching

General English teaching refers to the teaching with the main objectives of imparting basic knowledge of English language and application ability. It focuses on cultivating students' basic language abilities such as listening, reading, translation and writing. It also emphasizes the cultivation of knowledge and basic abilities. The objectives of general English reflect the humanistic nature of English teaching. The teaching objects aim at freshmen and sophomores. Their English level is limited and they cannot communicate in academic English. The teaching methods generally cover discussion, communication, listening and speaking, etc. General English is the basis of general

academic English. Without basic skills of general English, it is difficult to meet the standards and requirements of academic English.

General academic English is a branch of English for special purposes (ESP). Its main purpose is to provide academic language support for college students to carry out professional learning in English, so as to help students successfully participate in relevant academic activities. General academic English is mainly prepared for academic research, including paper publication, conference speech, literature reading, report writing, international academic exchange, etc. Therefore, general academic English teaching highlights the instrumental characteristics of college English teaching.

### 3. Challenges for general academic English teachers

Compared with general English teaching, general academic English teaching puts forward higher requirements for teachers' professional ability and quality which determines the teaching effect. Cai Jigang, a famous Chinese scholar, put forward the knowledge structure of Public English teachers 2.0. He held the opinion that teachers should not only have a solid and systematic language foundation, but also be familiar with the construction and dissemination of professional knowledge. (Cai Jigang, 2020). Therefore, general academic English teachers confront many challenges concerning learning ability, teaching ability and evaluation ability.

#### 3.1 Lack of learning ability of interdisciplinary knowledge.

According to the survey, the educational background of most college English teachers covers from British and American literature, translation to linguistics. The educational background cannot satisfy the need of general academic English teaching. Mastering interdisciplinary knowledge is a great challenge for teachers who have been engaged in general English teaching for a long time.

Take North China Electric Power University (Baoding) for example, general English has been set for freshmen for the first term of the first year. General academic English will be set for the second term. As for the English teachers, they are forced to transfer their role to face the transformation. The students' major covers from electric engineering, machinery engineering to thermal engineering and other fields, so teachers should take different major into consideration in their teaching and learn relevant interdisciplinary knowledge in order to adapt to the needs of the students.

#### 3.2 General academic English teaching ability is limited

The important reform goal of general academic English teaching is to cultivate students' language output ability in combination with

professional fields, such as the language expression ability in academic reports, academic speeches, academic papers, professional design and so on. There are great differences between general academic English and general English in terms of teaching objectives, contents, curriculum design and methods.

#### 3.2.1 Teaching Objectives

Macro teaching objectives include cultivating students' general academic English ability, enhancing cross-cultural communication awareness and communication ability, and developing autonomous learning ability, so that students can effectively use English in their study, life, social communication and future work.

Micro teaching objectives embrace three aspects: be familiar with the structure of formal papers, read English academic articles and draw information from them; master the basic skills of writing literature reviews and papers in English; report research results and participate in academic discussions.

#### 3.2.2 Teaching Contents

Academic skills and literacy teaching are developed from five aspects: listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation.

Academic skills include seven modules: ①accumulating academic vocabulary; ②mastering the types and characteristics of academic lectures, skillfully using note taking method; ③cultivating the skills of participating in academic discussions and making academic reports; ④being able to read professional articles in English; ⑤training English literature retrieval ability; ⑥writing English academic papers in a standardized format; ⑦carrying out professional related academic English translation. Relying on the contents of seven modules, academic English guides students to break through the difficulties of grasping the key points of learning, and cultivate academic literacy such as problem analysis and problem-solving ability, critical thinking and creative thinking, team cooperation consciousness and cross-cultural communication ability.

#### 3.2.3 Curriculum Design

According to Bloom's classification of educational objectives, there are three fields: cognition, emotion and action. The objectives of each domain are divided into several levels from low to high. The objectives of cognitive field include six levels: knowledge, understanding, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. Based on Bloom's theory, teachers can design the curriculum by combining the core knowledge and skills of general academic English from easy part to difficult part, from low level to high level. Teachers can carry out modular structure decomposition and situational support, and use micro skills to present it in class, and guide students to

construct general academic English knowledge step by step in “learning by doing” and “doing by learning”.

### 3.2.4 Teaching Methods

Teachers can integrate case teaching and text teaching to realize effective teaching. In the implementation scheme of case teaching, in the first preparation stage, teachers can select a social hot topic related to the theme as a typical case and send it to the students through the online group. Then students can go to the library or network to consult relevant materials, read literature, analyze and demonstrate the controversial parts, form their own views and provide sufficient arguments. When the case report is made, students can write the report and discuss it in class. Finally, with the teachers' help, students can modify and submit the content of the report. Through literature reading, students can increase the opportunities of language input and expand their English vocabulary. Based on case discussion, they can provide an output channel for language learning, enhance their oral and written English expression ability, and achieve the goal of applying what they have learned.

On the basis of case teaching, text teaching is also adopted. First, teachers need to select analysis materials, such as international journal papers and academic reports related to students' majors, so as to ensure the authenticity of the corpus; second, teachers can conduct structure analysis to master the writing methods of the abstract, introduction, literature review, conclusion and other parts of the paper from a macro perspective; Third, the summary of language features is analyzed from the micro level of syntax and words, such as the application of passive voice, the selection of tense and so on.

Only by combining a variety of methods aimed to different teaching objectives and teaching resources, can teachers reasonably carry out teaching design. Therefore, teachers need to master flexible and diversified teaching ability in order to meet higher requirements in teaching.

### 3.3. Evaluation ability needs to be improved.

As an important part of teaching activities, teaching evaluation not only provides teaching feedback and improves teaching quality for teachers but also serves as the effective means to understand their own learning situation, adjust learning strategies and improve learning efficiency for students (Cai Jigang, 2017). Evaluation generally includes formative evaluation and summative evaluation. Formative evaluation is to evaluate students' learning ability according to teaching objectives. The teaching model of general academic English, which is learner-centered, based on project research and genre analysis, needs a suitable process evaluation method. This evaluation model attaches importance to the learning process and learning results, paying attention to students' deep

learning and metacognition, and cultivating students' learning ability. In order to achieve this goal, teachers and students should participate in the evaluation process, which puts forward high requirements for teachers' evaluation design ability.

### 4. Strategies of teachers' professional development.

Facing the above challenges, general academic English teachers are under great pressure. How can they tackle the professional transformation and students' high expectation? Possible strategies are provided in the following.

#### 4.1 Expand the interdisciplinary knowledge

New trend forces teachers to target at a strong sense of professional development when engaging in general academic English teaching. Teachers can conduct interdisciplinary self-study through surfing the Internet or reading books; understand the vocabulary and terms in the fields of medicine, law, finance and other related disciplines. In addition, teachers also need to strengthen cooperation with professional teachers in relevant fields. University authority also may provide training opportunities for teachers to expand their interdisciplinary knowledge.

#### 4.2. Establish a professional community.

Professional community has become very popular in recent years. It allows teachers to grow together through joint learning and discussion, mutual exchange and communication in the group situation. It can effectively promote the exchange of knowledge, ideas and methods among teachers, and enable teachers to analyze and compare the useful information obtained and shared with the existing knowledge schema, so as to build a new knowledge structure and skill framework. The construction of general academic English community can regularly carry out observation and hold small research seminars to explore general academic English.

#### 4.3. Reform evaluation means

The single summative language test of curriculum evaluation mechanism cannot fully reflect the learning effect of students. Therefore, a multiple evaluation mechanism is highly recommended. Student's final score = formative assessment (60%) + summative assessment (40%). Formative assessment is based on the contents of the seven modules of general academic English to investigate the basic skills in listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation. In order to encourage students' innovation and practice, it is integrated into the practice-oriented evaluation system. Taking students' participation in classroom projects, creativity and cooperative learning as important indicators of evaluation, the model of teachers' scoring and students' mutual evaluation should be realized through the network platform. In the final evaluation part, students are required to write scientific research reports or small papers, and apply the

contents learned in the course to solve practical problems. Only by changing the evaluation means can teachers fundamentally promote the development of students' academic skills and academic literacy in all aspects.

## 5. Conclusion

General academic English course is a highly targeted course. Its main purpose is to cultivate students' English language skills for academic research, so that they can carry out academic exchanges on the international academic stage in the future. Therefore, general academic English teaching is bound to become the mainstream direction of college English teaching reform and development. Accordingly, teachers are required to have scientific research ability, reading competence of academic literature, and rich experience in writing academic paper. Teachers are intended to cultivate students into high-level talents with international vision and promote China's academic achievements to the world stage. This research focuses on the challenges for college English teachers in China when they are facing the transition from General English to General Academic English teaching. Feasible strategies have been put forward to meet these challenges. In the educational ecology of general academic English development, teachers are always the core of educational ecology. Only by improving teachers' sense of identity and belonging, can teachers continue to stimulate their professional development.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This research is financially supported by Research Project of English Teaching Reform of Higher Education in Hebei Province (2021YYJG009).

## REFERENCES

- Cai, J. (2014). A Subversive Foreign Language Teaching Concept and Method —A Study on the Differences between General Academic English and College English [J] Foreign Language Teaching Theory and Practice, (2); 1-7.
- Cai, J. (2017). A Study on the Theoretical Basis and Main Contents of the Revision *The Reference Framework for College English Teaching in Shanghai* [J] Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education, 173(1); 90-96.
- Cai, J. (2020). Upgrading the Knowledge Structure of Public Foreign Language Teachers in Colleges and Universities: from 1.0 to 2.0 [J] Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education, (1); 65-70.
- Wang, S. (2016). Interpretation of the Key Points of *College English Teaching Guide* [J] Foreign Language World, (3); 2-10.
- Xia, J. (2014). On the Construction of College General Academic English Curriculum [J] Foreign Language Teaching Theory and Practice, (4); 6-9.
- Yang, H. (2018). General Academic English? General English? [J]. Foreign Language World, (5); 27-33.