

Balancing Examination Preparation and Language Competency Development in Postgraduate Entrance Examination English Elective Courses: A Perspective From Chinese Application-Oriented Universities

LI Zhentan

Nanning University, Nanning, China

Postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses have become an important part of College English education in Chinese universities. However, many of these courses remain strongly examination-oriented, with limited attention to students' broader language competencies and longer-term academic needs. From a competency-based perspective, this paper examines the relationship between examination preparation and language competency development in application-oriented universities. It discusses the limitations of excessive test-oriented instruction and considers how examination tasks can also support academic reading, writing, translation, critical thinking, and autonomous learning. The paper argues that examination preparation and competency development need not be treated as competing goals. A more balanced approach can better address students' immediate examination needs while supporting their subsequent academic development.

Keywords: postgraduate entrance examination English, College English curriculum, competency-based education, application-oriented universities

Introduction

The growth of postgraduate education in China has increased demand for postgraduate entrance examination preparation. As English remains an important admission subject, many universities offer postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses within the College English curriculum. These courses often emphasize vocabulary, grammar, reading, and test-taking strategies to meet students' immediate examination needs. While such instruction may support examination performance, an excessive focus on test preparation may limit the development of broader competencies, including critical reading, academic writing, translation, and autonomous learning.

This issue is particularly relevant to application-oriented universities, where students differ in language proficiency, learning backgrounds, and postgraduate aspirations. The key challenge is therefore how to balance examination preparation with broader language competency development. Although previous studies have addressed College English development and competency-based language education, comparatively limited attention has been given to postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses in application-oriented

universities. This paper examines these courses from a competency-based perspective and discusses how examination preparation and language competency development can be better balanced.

Review of Literature

College English Development in China

College English in China has gradually moved beyond language knowledge instruction toward broader goals such as academic development, intercultural communication, and lifelong learning (College Foreign Languages Teaching Steering Committee of the Ministry of Education, 2020; Wang, 2016). This development has encouraged more differentiated course provision to address students' varied academic and professional needs. ESP (English for Specific Purposes), EAP (English for Academic Purposes), and other specialized courses, for example, have been introduced to strengthen the connection between English learning and specific academic or professional contexts (Wen, 2014). However, research has focused mainly on compulsory College English, ESP, and EAP, while postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses have received comparatively limited attention.

Competency-Based Language Education

Competency-based education emphasizes learners' ability to apply knowledge in meaningful contexts rather than merely acquire knowledge (L. M. Spencer & S. M. Spencer, 1993). In language education, Hymes (1972) introduced the concept of communicative competence, which was further developed by Canale and Swain (1980) through grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence; Canale (1983) later added discourse competence. More recent competency-based perspectives also emphasize transferable abilities, authentic learning, and alignment between learning outcomes and educational goals (Carlgren, 2021).

In the Chinese College English context, competency-oriented approaches emphasize academic literacy, critical thinking, intercultural communication, and autonomous learning (College Foreign Languages Teaching Steering Committee of the Ministry of Education, 2020; Wang, 2016). The Production-Oriented Approach similarly highlights meaningful language production and competency development (Wen, 2018). These perspectives suggest that postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses should not be viewed solely as test-preparation courses, but as courses in which examination needs may be balanced with broader language competency development.

Although College English development and competency-based language education have been widely discussed, comparatively little attention has been paid to postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses, particularly in application-oriented universities. Existing discussions tend to emphasize examination strategies and teaching practices rather than the relationship between examination preparation and broader language development. This paper therefore focuses on how these two goals can be balanced in the context of Chinese application-oriented universities.

Balancing Examination Preparation and Language Competency Development

Limitations of the Current Examination-Oriented Curriculum

Postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses have become an important component of College English provision in many Chinese universities. These courses respond directly to students' immediate need for examination preparation, and their content is therefore often shaped by examination requirements.

In many institutions, instruction focuses primarily on vocabulary, grammar, reading exercises, and test-taking strategies. Such approaches may improve students' familiarity with examination formats and requirements, but an excessive emphasis on test preparation can limit opportunities to develop broader abilities, including critical reading, academic writing, translation, and autonomous learning. As a result, English learning may become closely associated with examination performance rather than with the broader development of language competence.

This issue is particularly relevant in application-oriented universities, where students often differ in language proficiency, learning backgrounds, and postgraduate aspirations. Uniform course objectives and teaching arrangements may not adequately address these differences. Some students continue to require support in basic language knowledge and examination strategies, while others may benefit from greater emphasis on academic literacy and higher-level communication skills. The central challenge, therefore, is not whether examination preparation should remain part of these courses, but how it can be combined with broader language development.

Reconsidering Course Objectives From a Competency-Based Perspective

Competency-based education provides a useful perspective for reconsidering the role of postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses. Rather than focusing only on the acquisition of linguistic knowledge, it emphasizes learners' ability to apply knowledge and skills in meaningful contexts. From this perspective, the value of such courses can be understood not only in terms of examination performance but also in terms of the competencies students develop through the learning process.

Examination preparation and competency development are not necessarily contradictory objectives. Examination materials and tasks can also provide opportunities for broader language learning when they are used purposefully. Reading comprehension exercises, for example, can be used not only to practise answer-selection strategies but also to develop information analysis and critical interpretation. Writing tasks can support logical organization and academic expression, while translation activities may help students develop greater awareness of linguistic differences and intercultural communication.

A competency-based perspective also draws attention to students' learning roles. Examination-oriented classrooms often rely heavily on teacher explanation, strategy instruction, and repeated practice. Although these methods may be effective for short-term preparation, they may provide fewer opportunities for students to develop learner autonomy. A broader approach can encourage students to monitor their own learning, select appropriate strategies, and continue developing their English abilities beyond the immediate examination context.

The relationship between examination preparation and subsequent postgraduate study is also important. Students who enter postgraduate education are expected to read academic texts, participate in research-related activities, and communicate ideas in academic contexts. Postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses can therefore serve not only as preparation for an admission test but also as an opportunity to develop competencies that may support later academic learning.

Balancing these two functions does not require examination requirements to be reduced or ignored. Rather, examination-related activities can be connected with broader language learning objectives. When examination tasks are used to develop reading, writing, translation, and independent learning abilities, test preparation can contribute to both immediate examination needs and longer-term language development.

Implications for Course Design

A balance between examination preparation and language competency development has several implications for the design of postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses.

First, course objectives can include both examination performance and broader language development. Preparation for the examination remains a practical priority, but it can be accompanied by objectives related to academic reading, written communication, translation, critical thinking, and autonomous learning. Such objectives can help connect students' immediate examination needs with their future academic development.

Second, course content can combine examination-related materials with broader learning resources. Past examination papers and practice materials remain important because they familiarize students with assessment requirements. At the same time, academic texts, discipline-related materials, and communicative tasks can provide opportunities to use English for knowledge acquisition and academic interaction. More specifically, examination-related tasks can be redesigned to serve both test preparation and competency development. Reading comprehension exercises, for instance, may begin with timed practice to familiarize students with examination requirements and then be extended through activities such as identifying argument structure, examining the writer's position, summarizing key information, or discussing alternative interpretations. Writing tasks can similarly move beyond model imitation by encouraging students to revise organization, clarify reasoning, and improve the appropriateness of academic expression. Translation exercises may include comparison of different versions and discussion of lexical, syntactic, and cultural choices. In this way, familiar examination materials can be used not only to strengthen students' test-taking performance but also to promote analytical reading, written expression, linguistic awareness, and more active engagement with language.

Third, course design needs to take account of learner diversity. This is particularly important in application-oriented universities, where students may enter the course with different language foundations, learning expectations, and postgraduate plans. Differentiated tasks and flexible learning support can help address these differences while maintaining common course objectives.

Finally, course outcomes can be considered from both examination and competency perspectives. Examination performance remains an important indicator of course effectiveness, but it need not be the only one. Development in language use, academic literacy, and autonomous learning can also be regarded as meaningful outcomes. Accordingly, course assessment can combine examination-related indicators with evidence of broader competency development. Mock examination scores and performance on timed tasks can continue to provide useful information about students' readiness for the entrance examination. At the same time, short reading summaries, revised writing assignments, translation revisions, learning records, and self-assessment can offer additional evidence of how students are developing their language use and academic learning abilities. Such forms of assessment need not replace examination-based evaluation; rather, they can complement it by providing a more comprehensive view of students' progress. Feedback can also focus not only on whether answers are correct, but on the strategies, reasoning, and language choices underlying students' performance, thereby encouraging reflection and more autonomous learning.

A balanced course design may also be organized in stages rather than maintaining the same emphasis throughout the semester. At an early stage, instruction can focus more on diagnosing students' language needs, consolidating essential knowledge, and introducing basic examination strategies. As the course progresses, examination tasks can be increasingly integrated with activities that develop reading, writing, translation, and

independent learning abilities. Closer to the examination period, timed practice and strategy review may receive greater attention, while reflection on errors and learning processes can still be retained. Such a phased arrangement allows the relative emphasis on examination preparation and competency development to change according to students' immediate needs without treating the two goals as separate parts of the course. Overall, postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses can serve both an immediate examination function and a broader educational function. The two purposes need not compete with each other. By connecting examination preparation with language competency development, these courses can respond to students' short-term academic goals while also supporting their longer-term learning needs.

Conclusion

This paper has examined postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses from a competency-based perspective, with particular attention to the balance between examination preparation and broader language development. Examination preparation remains an important function of these courses, but an excessive focus on test performance may limit opportunities to develop academic reading, writing, translation, critical thinking, and autonomous learning.

For application-oriented universities, this balance is especially important because students differ in language proficiency, learning needs, and postgraduate aspirations. Postgraduate entrance examination English elective courses can therefore be positioned not only as preparation for an admission test but also as part of broader College English education. By linking examination tasks with competency development, these courses may better support both students' immediate examination goals and their subsequent academic learning. Future research may further examine how this balance can be achieved in different institutional contexts.

References

- Canale, M. (1983). From communicative competence to communicative language pedagogy. In J. C. Richards and R. W. Schmidt (Eds.), *Language and communication* (pp. 2-27). London: Longman.
- Canale, M., & Swain, M. (1980). Theoretical bases of communicative approaches to second language teaching and testing. *Applied Linguistics*, 1(1), 1-47. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/I.1.1>
- Carlgren, D. (2021). Competency-based curriculum transition: A conceptual framework. *The Journal of Competency-Based Education*, 6(2), e01229. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1002/cbe2.1229>
- College Foreign Languages Teaching Steering Committee of the Ministry of Education. (2020). *College English teaching guidelines* (2020 edition). Beijing: Higher Education Press. [In Chinese]
- Hymes, D. (1972). On communicative competence. In J. B. Pride and J. Holmes (Eds.), *Sociolinguistics: Selected readings* (pp. 269-293). London: Penguin.
- Spencer, L. M., Jr., & Spencer, S. M. (1993). *Competence at work: Models for superior performance*. Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons.
- Wang, S. R. (2016). An interpretation of the Guidelines on College English Teaching. *Foreign Language World*, 37(3), 2-10. [In Chinese]
- Wen, Q. F. (2014). Debate on teaching EGP or ESP in college English: Problems and suggested solutions. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*, 36(1), 1-8. [In Chinese]
- Wen, Q. (2018). The production-oriented approach to teaching university students English in China. *Language Teaching*, 51(4), 526-540. Retrieved from <https://doi.org/10.1017/S026144481600001X>