

## English major education in China: a chronological analysis

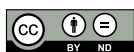
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## Abstract

This paper offers an overview over the development of China's English major in higher educational institutions since 1977 in different stages: the restoration period (1977-1986), developing period (1987-1997), prosperity period (1998-2009), and adjustment period (2010-present). The problems and controversy over this major are also introduced and analysed. Overall, this paper aims to inform readers of the recent history and current situation of the English major in Chinese universities, which might also shed light on the studies of the language related programs in universities in general.

**Keywords:** English major; Chinese higher education; history and current situation.

## 1. Introduction

English has become an indispensable part of education in China since the last century, and its history could date back to the late 1860s. English and its education have substantially contributed to the introduction of modern science, technology, thoughts, etc., in China, and have played a crucial role in China's modernization. With the fast pace of globalization and the role of English as a lingua franca, English education has received growing attention in China in the past 50 years. This is manifested by the fact that English has long been one of the three most important subjects (mathematics and Chinese being the other two) from primary education<sup>1</sup> to college education. It is still an important, though for some elective, course to take for post-graduate and doctoral students. With the growth of English education in China, English has also been taken as a major in the universities in China. In the past decades, the English major is not only responsible for English education in China from primary to college levels, but has also gone beyond the practical confines of language skills and extended its scope to academic areas like linguistics, literary studies, translation studies, cultural studies, etc. In this sense, the English major in China is a typical subject that has both 'practical' flavour and academic spirit, and its development, current situation, and recent controversy and debate might provide insight and special perspectives to those who have interest in the education of foreign languages in China and in language related majors in general. This paper aims to give an overview of English major education in China since 1977, when China began to implement its opening up and reform policy, which played a key role in the booming of English major in the past decades. Key stages, current situation, and recent controversy and debate will be specified in this paper.

## 2. Major periods and their corresponding features of English major education in China

English major education in China in the past 50 years can be divided into four phases: restoration period (1977-1986), developing period (1987-1997), prosperity period (1998-2009), and adjustment period (2010-present), and below we will concentrate on the periods since 1977.

### 2.1. Restoration period: 1977-1986

It is generally acknowledged that English education (including English major education) started from 1862 with the founding of the School of Combined Learning (京师同文馆) in Beijing, which later in 1902 constituted an important founding component of the Imperial Peking University (now Peking University). In the following few decades, English education devel-

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1 The Ministry of Education in China stipulates that English education in China starts from the third year at primary schools, and may begin at the first year or even at kindergarten in cities wherever possible.

oped with the aim to translate western science and technologies, and to introduce western civilizations. At the very early stages of the People's Republic of China, English education enjoyed a short period of fast development, and then was destroyed by the 10 years of Cultural Revolution. It was not restored until the late 1970s.

In 1977, the National College Entrance Examination (NCEE for short hereafter) was resumed after nearly two decades of suspension, and scores of the English test were calculated by 10% of its raw scores in the total scores. In 1983, raw scores of the English Test at NCEE were included<sup>2</sup>, which indicates the importance of English learning at middle schools. These measures, with many other efforts, quickly restored English education in China. In this period, English major education emphasized disciplinary development by designing national syllabuses, curriculums, etc. To be specific, this period has the following features.

### 2.1.1. Emphasizing disciplinary development

One of the key features of this period is the national endeavors to promote English learning at the official level. In the late 1970s, Chenzhi Liao, the Vice Chairman of China's National People's Congress, called on the learning of English so as to speed up modernizations in agriculture, industry, national defense, science, and technology. In the same year, one of the editorials in *People's Education*<sup>3</sup> appealed to learn English with all efforts. All these shows that the Chinese government encouraged leaning English nationwide, which created a good atmosphere for English major education in China<sup>4</sup>.

Another key feature is the release of the first syllabus for English major education in China. In 1979, the Ministry of Education (MOE for short) in China issued *Some Viewpoints for Enhancing English Learning* (《加强外语教育的几点意见》), which appealed to educate more English majors, properly plan the teaching of different foreign languages, and train more English teachers. In the same year, the MOE released national teaching plans for English majors at foreign studies universities, normal universities, and comprehensive universities<sup>5</sup>. These teaching plans are the

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2 This means that, if one test taker scores 100 in the NCEE, this raw score (i.e., 100) was added to the scores of other tests. However, in 1977 the same score of the same test taker would only have a score of 10 due to the 10% counting.

3 *Renmin Jiaoyu* 人民教育 in Chinese. It is a journal believed to speak out the government's opinions.

4 The reason for stating this is that the promotion of English learning requires more English teachers, a predominant proportion of which are English majors.

5 Universities in China can be categorized into different types. One categorization is based on their educational orientations. For example, Beijing Foreign Studies University specifically aims to educate foreign language majors; Beijing Normal University mainly aims to educate prospective teachers; Peking University aims to educate talents for all professions. This being the general case before the 1990s, different types of universities are no longer "confined" to these orientations as their names suggest these days. That is to say, the graduates from normal universities may take other occupations than being teachers.

first ones in the history of China's English major education (Li et al., 1988: 377), and provided guidelines for English major education in China for the next 40 years (Dai & Hu, 2009: 94).

The MOE also released *The Syllabus for the First Two Years of English Major Education in Universities* (《高等学校英语专业基础阶段实践课教学大纲 (试行草案)》) in 1979. The syllabus provided explicit guidelines for the teaching of listening, speaking, reading, and writing for freshman and sophomore English majors. It also provided guidelines for the types and genres of teaching materials and formats of examinations for English major education. This is the first national syllabus stipulated for all types of universities, though it was mainly designed for the first two years of English major education in China. This syllabus, together with the previously released three teaching plans for different types of universities, standardized and systematized China's English major education at its early developmental stages, and hence greatly promoted English major education in China (Dai & Hu, 2009: 94-95), which played an essential role in China's education, economy, science, and technology, among others.

### 2.1.2. Training more college teachers

English teachers are the base for English education and enjoy a decisive role in its implementation. In the late 1970s and 1980s, China suffered a severe shortage of English teachers, especially competent teachers. As countermeasures, MOE of China and the British Council co-hosted short-period national English teacher trainings presided by Geoffrey Leech and Christine Nuttal from UK and Anne Stokes, Brian Smith, and Wendy Allen from Canada in Shanghai International Studies University and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies in 1977. This type of training was systematized with the MOE's release of *College English Teacher Training Projects: 1980-1983* (《1980年至1983年高校英语教师培训计划》) in 1980, which as a result educated a large number of English teachers in the early 1980s and met the great social needs at that time.

Apart from initiating national training programs, MOE also began to send Chinese English teachers to study abroad (e.g., Australia). These teachers (e.g., Zhuanglin Hu, Wenzhong Hu, Yuanshen Huang<sup>6</sup>) quickly enhanced their professional skills not only in teaching but also in research, and became backbones of China's English major education.

### 2.1.3. Promoting publications of teaching materials

Teaching materials are essential for English education, the lacking of which would affect the quality of English majors. Hence, MOE set up the National Committee for Composing and

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6 Professor Zhuanglin Hu later became the major proponent of Systemic Functional Grammar. Professor Wenzhong Hu became an expert in Intercultural Communication and English Education, and Professor Yuanshen Huang later became an expert in literature studies and translations.

Evaluating Teaching Materials for Foreign Language Majors (全国高等学校外语专业教材编审委员会) to compose, approve, and evaluate teaching materials for foreign language majors nationwide in 1980. The committee released *Guidelines for Composing English Teaching Materials for Freshmen and Sophomores* (《关于基础英语教材编写原则的几点意见》). The guidelines advocated the fostering of basic language skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and proposed that English teaching materials should be arranged with such teaching theories as situational method, functional-communicative method, function-structural method, etc. These guidelines diverted English major education in China from traditional grammar-translation method, audio-lingual method to communication/function-oriented language teaching.

In order to enhance the publication of materials for English teaching, several publishers were set up around 1980, among which were Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press (1979), Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press (1979), Shanghai Foreign Language Audio-Visual Publishing House (1983), etc. Those presses were particularly oriented to publish English teaching materials, and as a consequence greatly enhanced English teaching in China.

#### 2.1.4. Advocating academic research

**To establish associations and hold conferences.** Before 1980, few college English teachers in China engaged in academic research, which hindered the development of English education. In order to enhance English major education, several associations, such as China Foreign Language Education Association and China English Language Education Association, were set up in the early 1980s. It is also worthy of mentioning that the Symposium on Applied Linguistics and English Teaching was held at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GUFS), which served as the first national symposium on English major education in China. Few years later (1985), China hosted the First International Conference on English Education in China at GUFS. This was the first international conference on English education held in China<sup>7</sup>, which bridged national research on English education in China with the international context.

**To encourage publication.** Around 1980, several journals were launched, which provided important arenas for English education research. These journals not only promoted research qualities of English major education, but also had a profound influence on English education in general in China.

To sum up, in the late 1970s to the middle 1980s, English major education quickly restored to what it had been like in the 1950s and early 1960s with a series of endeavors in disciplinary

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7 Several world-renowned professors, like M. A. K. Halliday, P. Strevens, G. R. Trucker, attended the conference.

development, teacher training, teaching materials development, and academic research, and thus paved the way for its fast development in the next 10 years.

## **2.2. Development period: 1987-1997**

After 10 years of restoration, English major education stepped into fast development as shown by a large-scale survey of English major education, the release of the first general syllabus, the education of inter-disciplinary talents of English majors, the nationwide proficiency test of English majors, and the advancements in academic research.

### **2.2.1. A large-scale survey of English major education in China**

In 1988, Professor Runqing Liu conducted a national survey on teachers, curriculums, students' proficiencies, reference books, teaching facilities, and graduate/graduates' qualities of English major education, and published the *Report on Undergraduate Education of English Majors* (Liu et al., 1989). This was the first national survey of English major education in China. It revealed not only the teaching conditions, but also the achievements and weakness of English major education in China, the result of which served as a reference for later educational planning.

### **2.2.2. Release of the first, non-university-type-sensitive syllabus**

In 1989, MOE released the *National Syllabus of English Major Education for Freshmen and Sophomores* (《高等学校英语专业基础阶段教学大纲》). The syllabus emphasized the importance of developing English majors' basic language skills, enhancing their language performance, training their learning habits, learning strategies, and logical thinking abilities, diversifying their social cultural knowledge, and cultivating their sensitivity to cultural differences. It also regulated the relations between English teaching and moral education, between linguistic knowledge and language performance, between accuracy and fluency, among listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and between Chinese and English in the process of English major education. This was the first unified national syllabus which was not confined to the education in universities (i.e., it applied to the education of English majors in different types of colleges in the first two years). In addition, this syllabus was avant-garde at that time in emphasizing the importance of fostering English majors' communicative competence, selecting appropriate teaching methods, taking full use of modern technologies, and incorporating extracurricular activities into formal English major education. The syllabus had a profound influence on China's English major education till today.

In 1990, MOE released the *National Syllabus of English Major Education for Juniors and Seniors* (《高等学校英语专业高年级阶段英语教学大纲 (试行本)》). This syllabus is a continuation of the one for freshmen and sophomores, which highlighted the need to cultivate English majors' comprehensive English skills, enrich their cultural knowledge, enhance their

communicative competence, implement heuristic and discussion-prompted teaching methods, inspire their creativeness and practical abilities, and cultivate their logical as well as independent thinking abilities.

The release of the national syllabuses for freshmen, sophomores, juniors, and seniors symbolized the construction of a complete and systematic teaching system for English major education in China, and defined the approach of English major education in the next 3 decades (Dai & Hu, 2009: 124).

### **2.2.3. Education of inter-disciplinary talents of English majors**

In the 1950s and early 1960s, English majors were mainly trained to have a fair mastery of English literature. Since the initiation of the Reform and Opening Policy in 1979, China suffered a severe shortage of talents who could use English to communicate with those outside of China. In order to quickly provide China with enough talents who had a good mastery of English language skills and an understanding of other expertise (e.g., economy, finance, law, etc.), English major education in China began to educate inter-disciplinary talents in the early 1980s. This was shown by the MOE's 1987 release of the *Catalogue of Undergraduate Programs in Social Sciences of Higher Education* (《普通高等学校社会科学本科专业目录》(征求意见稿)), in which English major education was divided into seven related programs, i.e., English Language and Culture, English Language and Literature, English for Specific Purposes (Science and Technology), English for Specific Purposes (Tourism), English for Specific Purposes (Foreign Trade), English for Specific Purposes (Foreign Affairs) and Linguistics. The English for Specific Purposes related programs were the very embryo of interdisciplinary education for English majors. The interdisciplinary education of English majors was expanded to English plus Mass Media, English plus Business Administration, English plus Law, English plus Commerce, etc., and became China's mainstream English major education since 1995. The mainstream English major education in China then formally shifted from educating talents in English literature to interdisciplinary ones.

### **2.2.4. Implementation of national proficiency tests for English majors**

In this period, another distinctive feature is the implementation of national proficiency tests. In 1990, Test for English Majors (Band 4) (TEM-4 for short) was implemented nationwide to sophomore English majors. In 1992, Test for English Majors (Band 8) (TEM-8) was implemented nationwide to senior English majors. Though these two tests do not include items to test students' oral proficiency, they still serve as good indicators of the qualities of English major education in universities of China, and have significant effects on China's English major education. For example, they have in a sense compelled different universities to reflect on their own English major education and provide clear data to national English teaching committees to reflect on national syllabus designs.



### 2.2.5. Advancement of academic research

Academic research was greatly improved with the publication of such books as *Foundations of General Linguistics* (Wang, 1988), *Introduction to Semantics* (Wu, 1988), *A Survey of Pragmatics* (He, 1988), *Applied Linguistics* (Gui, 1988), *Essentials of Text Analysis* (Huang, 1988), *A Survey of Stylistics* (Qin, 1988), *A Survey of Systemic-Functional Grammar* (Hu, Zhu & Zhang, 1989), *Applied Psycholinguistics* (Wang, 1990), etc. As a consequence, major branches of linguistics, especially applied linguistics, pragmatics, stylistics, and functional grammar, formally stepped into China's academia, and the authors of the aforementioned books became major founders and promoters of the related disciplines in China.

As an indicator of the fast development of English major education in China during this period, the number of universities which had English major education programs rose from about 300 at the end of the 1980s to around 790 in 1997.

## 2.3. Prosperity period: 1998-2009

After 10 years of fast development, English education in China stepped into its prosperity period. This period was featured by the release of the first national non-grade-sensitive syllabus, large-scale interdisciplinary education of English majors, implementation of national disciplinary evaluations, initiation of national oral tests for English majors, and sharp increase of numbers of universities offering English major education programs.

### 2.3.1. Release of the first, non-grade-sensitive syllabus

In 1989 and 1990, as mentioned previously, MOE released two national syllabuses for English major education, one for freshmen and sophomores, the other for juniors and seniors. When being implemented, these syllabuses were found to have problems like overlaps, gaps, incoherence, etc. In order to tackle these problems, MOE released a new National Syllabus of English Major Education in Universities (《高等学校英语专业英语教学大纲》). The syllabus was the first in history to guide all grades of English major education and applied to all types of universities, and renowned for its systematic and coherent descriptions (or rather requirements) in teaching objectives and curriculum designs.

Another prominent feature of the syllabus lies in its advocacy of interdisciplinary education of English majors, which formally shifted English major education in China from cultivating talents in English literature to more practical ends (e.g., English for finance, for business, for law).

Another innovation of this syllabus is that it divided the courses for English majors into three types: language-skills-oriented courses (e.g., listening, speaking, reading, writing) (英语专业技能课), professional-knowledge-oriented courses (e.g., linguistics, literature, cultural studies) (英语专业知识课), and related-professional-knowledge courses (e.g., Studies on Diplomacy,

Communication Studies, Education Studies)(相关专业知识课). This categorization still serves as the guideline for curriculum designs of English major education in China.

### 2.3.2. Large-scale interdisciplinary education of English majors

A survey in 1998 indicated that there were nearly no social needs for graduates who could only use or speak English but without other expertise, and those English majors who were also equipped with other professional skills were strongly welcomed (Dai & Hu, 2009: 46). In response to this, MOE advocated explicitly on interdisciplinary education of English majors in *Suggestions on the Reform of Undergraduate English Major Education in the 21st Century* (《关于外语专业面向21世纪本科教育改革的若干意见》), and interdisciplinary education became the mainstream of English major education in China. The shift from language skills and/or literature education to interdisciplinary education contributed significantly to the prosperity of China's English major education in the late 1990s and the first decade of 2000.

### 2.3.3. Implementation of national disciplinary evaluations of English major education

Disciplinary evaluation is a major means to improve teaching qualities and promote sound development of the discipline being evaluated. In 2004, MOE implemented a trial evaluation of undergraduate English major education in four universities in Guangdong and Hunan Province. The next year, MOE formally released the *Scheme of National Evaluations on Undergraduate Foreign Language Education* (《高等学校外语专业本科教学评估方案(试行)》), and initiated national disciplinary evaluations on foreign languages (English was a major part) major education in China. To the end of 2008, 102 universities had been evaluated for their undergraduate English major education programs. The evaluations not only inspected the qualities of China's English major education, but also greatly promoted its development in the universities' preparation for the national evaluations.

### 2.3.4. Implementation of national oral tests for English majors

Another key feature of this period was the implementation of national oral tests for English majors. In the early 1990s, TEM-4 and TEM-8 was implemented as national tests for English majors, but they lack a component to assess test-takers' oral proficiency. To address this problem, TEM-4 and TEM-8 oral proficiency tests were implemented nationally in 1999 and 2003 respectively<sup>8</sup>. It is worth mentioning that the implementation of national oral tests cancelled

8 TEM-4 Oral Proficiency Test was initiated as a trial test for English majors since 1994, and formally implemented in 1999. TEM-8 Oral Proficiency Test was initiated as a trial test for English majors in 2000, and formally implemented in 2003.

the traditional paper-and-pen examinations, and enhanced English majors' competence in foreign language communication, which can be seen as a big step forward in the English education in China.

### **2.3.5. Increase of English major programs at higher education**

China began to expand its enrollment of undergraduates since 1999 in order to enhance its population's education levels as well as its general qualities, which in turn led to the increase of English major programs. Towards the end of the 2010s, English major education in China included three programs: English, Translation, and Business English. Till the end of 2008, more than 1300 universities had English programs; around 200 universities had business English programs, and nearly 200 universities had translation programs. English major education has become the nation's largest undergraduate discipline in China (Feng, 2016).

### **2.4. Adjustment period: 2010 to present**

In 2010, the key task for higher education was shifted to enhance qualities with the release of MOE's *Suggestions for Enhancing Overall Education Qualities* (《教育部关于全面提高高等教育质量的若干意见》). As a consequence, English major education in China switched from the pursuit of increasing numbers of universities that offer English major programs to that of higher teaching qualities, and thus moved into the adjustment period. This period is featured by the addition of new English major programs, the emphasis of liberal arts education, the release of National Standards of Teaching Quality for Foreign Language and Literature and China's Standards of English Language Ability, and the advocacy for Chinese featured teaching theories.

#### **2.4.1. Addition of new English major programs**

In 2012, English major education in China changed from one program (i.e., English Language and Literature) to three, with the addition of Business English and English Translation and Interpretation as two new English major education programs. That is to say, China today has three English related majors, i.e., English Language and Literature, Business English, and English Translation and Interpretation.

The founding of The Department of Linguistics at Beijing Language and Culture University is another endeavor to promote English major education in China. This breaks up the traditional classification of foreign language major programs by the types of languages being taught, and is beneficial for fostering students' abilities in abstract reasoning, critical thinking, scientific research, etc. More significantly, this effort presents a new approach to college foreign language major education which fully focuses on academic disciplines while language skill training is conducted via limited English language courses and the process of doing academic research and learning in English.

### 2.4.2. Emphasis on the nature of liberal arts of English major education

For the past few decades, English was only viewed as a tool for communication in China's high education. Hence, English major education focused on the training of such practical skills as listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation, etc. Since the beginning of the new century, teachers in China began to realize that English majors are lacking in non-linguistic quality like critical thinking (Huang, 2010) and knowledge in liberal arts (Hu & Sun, 2006), and English major education lacks its own characteristics<sup>9</sup> (Jiang & Jian, 2017). Within this context, English major education began to emphasize the education of liberal arts (e.g., literature, philosophy, critical thinking) in the new century.

### 2.4.3. Release of the *National Standard of Teaching Quality for Foreign Languages and Literature*

In order to enhance the quality of English major education, MOE released the *National Standard of Teaching Quality for Foreign Languages and Literature* (《外国语言文学类教学质量国家标准》). This is the first national standard of its kind and possesses the following key features: (a) it is related to all the disciplines of foreign language major education in China, including English, German, French, Arabic, etc.; (b) it proposes for the first time to foster English majors' abilities in literature appreciation, cross-cultural communication, critical thinking, applying information technologies, independent learning, etc.; (c) it explicitly lists basic requirements for teachers (e.g., number of teachers for a certain foreign language major program and their academic degrees), teaching facilities, teaching management, etc., for holding foreign language major educations; and (d) it advocates the development of university-based syllabuses for foreign language major education. The standard states explicitly the requirements for English major education programs, and will surely have profound influence on the English major education.

### 2.4.4. Release of *China's Standards of English Language Ability*

In 2018, MOE and the State Language Affairs Committee jointly released *China's Standards of English Language Ability* (《中国英语能力等级量表》, CSE for short). CSE portrays English language ability from the following perspectives: listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation, interpretation, etc., and thus emphasizes English majors' skills in learning English as a foreign language. It is the first national standard of its kind in China, and serves as a coherent as well as systematic reference for English education from primary schools to universities. It

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9 This being so is mainly caused by the fact that English is an obligatory course for non-English majors in China. The teaching is also focused on skills like listening, speaking, reading, writing, which is not, at least as the names suggest, fundamentally different from that of English majors.

could also guide the design of syllabuses, curriculums, assessments, etc., for English education at various educational levels.

#### **2.4.5. Advocation of China-based foreign language teaching theories**

Another key feature of this period is the advocacy of developing China-based foreign language teaching theories. In the past several decades, English education in China is mainly guided by theories designed by western scholars, which is by and large not totally applicable to the teaching conditions in China. Therefore, there is a strong need for China-based English teaching theories. As a consequence, many theories have emerged since 2010, like the production-orientated approach (Wen, 2015), the continuity hypothesis (Wang, 2016), foreign language education studies as a discipline (Wang & Li, 2017), etc. These theories are designed to enhance foreign language education with extensive consideration of the teaching conditions in China.

### **3. Problems of today's English major education in China**

English major education in China has witnessed great development in the past decades, and now it has been under adjustment period for over 10 years. However, we believe there are still several issues to be addressed in the near future.

#### **3.1. Lack of uniqueness in comparison with other majors**

Uniqueness is the premise for the existence of the English major programs. Otherwise, they can be replaced by other related programs. With the focus on training such practical skills as listening, speaking, reading, and writing, English major education at present is not basically different from the English education at primary and middle schools, and the education for non-English majors. Additionally, as a new endeavor, the Business English program of English major education is not fundamentally different from the English offered to those majoring in International Business. Another problem related to this is the interdisciplinary education of English majors. This also differentiates little from other disciplines being inter-related. For example, some universities advocate the interdisciplinary education of English majors to have knowledge on laws, either international, national, or both, but this type of education for English majors is not drastically different from the education offered to those majoring in laws who also have training in English. Therefore, from this perspective, it is to be easily assumed that the English major education in today's China is not fundamentally different from the types of education offered at primary and middle schools, and those offered to non-English majors at higher education. Of course, courses on literature, linguistics, and translation play a role in distinguishing English major education from the education of English for other majors, but these courses only account for a small amount of the courses. Another dimension for this distinction is the amount of the courses for specific skills: English majors have courses

on listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, which are often taken for more than one semester. However, this feature might be mitigated as students' overall English ability is developing: many students of other majors might have similar or better English ability than English majors.

### **3.2. Lack of uniqueness across different universities**

There are around 3000 universities in China, but they generally follow the same national syllabus for English major education, the result of which is that English major graduates nationwide possess very similar English skills. The graduates have similar vocabulary, and similar types of professional knowledge (mainly knowledge of English). Because there are many types of universities (e.g., foreign language universities, normal universities, science and technology universities, forestry universities, etc.), graduates will be more popular if they are educated with university-based syllabuses instead of the unanimous national one. This will contribute to educating unique types of English majors across different universities.

### **3.3. Recent criticism and debate**

The rapid increase of the English major program especially since 1990 in a sense indicated China's huge requirement for talents with English skills in its reform and opening-up. There is no doubt that English major education has provided important support to the development of China. Today, as English education in China has been popularized from primary schools to the university level, the new generations of university students in general have acquired far better English ability, which means that there is no such urgent and huge need of graduates from English major programs. This in a sense means that the current quantity of English major programs has gone beyond the market requirement. It is against this background that the debate over the necessity of English major emerges, which has attracted the heated discussion from scholars in both popular media and academic journals. The most prominent criticism comes from Cai (2018), who argues that four problems are involved in the English major education in China: (a) the educational scale does not match the need of the national and social development, i.e. there are too many English major programs in the universities; (2) the educational content does not meet the requirement of the students who choose English as their major; (3) the existence of the major is mainly due to the requirement of keeping this program in the university, instead of educating talents for the society; (4) the enrolment of undergraduates and postgraduates is mainly to meet the requirement of professors. Due to these problems, Cai believes that English major has lost its conscience, a very harsh and sensational criticism. Abstracting away the details of Cai's criticism, the central theme is that the English major is not practical or useful in terms of the job market, and, therefore, it is implied that most of the English major programs should be cut, and the education of English should be bound to a special subject in science and engineering. In other words, English should not be taken as an independent major, but as a tool subsidiary to a 'standard' major. Although Cai

(2018) is not published in an academic journal, but a newspaper, it has inspired a large-scale discussion in the field of English education in Chinese universities.

Sun (2018) and Guo (2020) are typical responses to Cai's criticism. Sun (2018) argues that the boom of English major programs is the reflection of China's economic development and opening up in the past decades, which in fact has played a significant role in the whole process. As English is still so far the major lingua franca in the predictable future, the emphasis of English education in Chinese universities should not be weakened, as English still plays a role for China in economic, cultural, and academic exchanges with other countries. Additionally, Sun defends the model of current English major design, which combines the training of linguistic skills and the education of academic subjects in linguistics and literature. He points out that this model is shown to meet the requirement of Chinese society, and the combination of both practical skills and academic training is completely in line with the higher education spirit that emphasises education in humanities that should go beyond the confines of vocational training. Concerning future development, Sun suggests that the elevation of knowledge in humanities and the ability of critical and analytical thinking should be further promoted. He also agrees that possible integration with other majors can constitute a dimension of the diverse English program models in the future.

Guo (2020) emphasises that academic criticism should be confined to academia instead of resorting to popular media, and he also argues that it is not reasonable to use such descriptions like 'with no conscience', which are too subjective to be legitimate in academic criticism. Further, Guo points out that Cai's criticism has blurred the boundary between English as a major and English as a language training program in the college. As an undergraduate major, the English major should have double values: training students' academic ability in humanities and promoting students' language skills for practical purposes that can meet the requirement of the job market. Regarding the former aspect, Guo argues that English majors have the potential of contribution in fields like linguistics, literary studies, regional and area studies, and they might also contribute to the research in history, philosophy, among others. For the latter aspect, English majors can apply their advantage in English language skills in areas of science and technology, social science, vocational training, etc.

#### **4. Conclusion and reflection**

The development of English major in China, compared with its counterparts in western countries, has the following special features. (1) It is deeply rooted in the country's overall policy: it is without doubt that the boom of the English major is first and foremost stimulated by China's opening up and reform policy. So in a sense, this major well indicates China's passion in embracing the world. It is also due to this reason that people take the practical requirement of the market as the sole standard to assess this major, as shown in 3.3. (2) As the development of this major has gone into a fairly mature stage, like other university subjects, the English ma-

major in Chinese universities has exhibited more features of a standard academic subject, hence involving more academic training in the education. Moreover, this major has established the comprehensive program pattern, including undergraduate, master's, and PhD programs. Almost all the core academic areas in the English program in western countries are now covered in Chinese universities, with many studies already reaching international standard in the shape of journal articles and monographs in prestigious journals and publishers respectively. That is, despite its practical root at the very beginning, the English major in China has developed into a comprehensive and high-level academic subject. In fact, many prominent fields in language related academic research at the international level, literary studies, linguistics, stylistics, semiotics, among others, are introduced and further developed in China by researchers trained in the English major. We tentatively assume that these two features seem to indicate this mechanism: a subject, when developed and supported in a proper academic institution, will gradually expand its academic properties despite its practical or pragmatic origin. This will in turn yield academic nutrition far more than the practical benefits. This, in turn, we believe, supports the counterargument against the criticism of the English major education in China. In this sense, we believe that the development of the English major and the recent controversy related to it can be taken as a typical example of the controversy over the function of university education in the whole world. After all, the controversy over the English major in China in nature concerns the tension between the practical need oriented to the job market and the liberal arts education. While we cannot say that this major is perfect, due to its history and the current debate, this major does strive to strike a balance between these two ends: language skills are emphasised and interdisciplinary training are attempted; on the other hand, academic research and training are consistently furthered.

To provide all the important details of the development of the English major in Chinese universities within a single paper is not realistic, considering both space limitation and our knowledge limitation. However, we hope that this paper could provide an overview to help our readers to understand this major in China, and, if possible, we also hope that the special features of this major in China could provide some implications to the development of language related programs in general.

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