

Back to basics

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A response to ‘The English major crisis in China’
(Chen, 2019)

Editor’s Note: This is a response to a previously published article. English Today encourages debates on important and controversial issues published in the journal and, whenever possible, will seek to broaden the discourse on those issues. Please also find the original author’s response following this article.

Introduction

The English major programme and related academic disciplines in Chinese universities are apparently experiencing growing pains as documented in the article entitled ‘The English Major Crisis in China’ published in this journal (Chen, 2019). In the article, Chen analysed the controversies surrounding the English major programme in Chinese universities and presented a somewhat gloomy prospect for the English major programme as an undergraduate subject in Chinese universities. Yet we found that the disheartening picture of the English major programme as portrayed by the article is open to question. We are also concerned that the article may misguide readers and negate the efforts that educators have undertaken to refine the English major programme in Chinese universities. For this reason, we would like to respond to the article with a different view, which has been made possible by our concerted efforts to bring the English major programme back to its basics over the last few years. We argue that the English major programme will play a critical role in promoting humanistic education in Chinese universities.

Critique of Chen (2019)’s article

With all due respect to Chen and the respondents in the article, we contend that the so-called ‘crisis’

surrounding the English major programme stems from the fact that many respondents in the article have ignored the essential nature of this subject and have thus failed to embrace it as part of a larger academic discipline. The five articles cited and analysed by Chen (2019) maintain that the English major is the learning of English language skills and that it has proved uncompetitive in the current job market; hence, the pressing crisis. The anger and disappointment vented in the comments Chen (2019) collected apparently come from the ‘victims’ sacrificed during these baffling transitions. We will



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elaborate our arguments to address three misleading claims put forward in Chen's article.

First and foremost, 'crisis' might be an exaggeration if applied to the current status of the English major programme. The English major programme has experienced a soaring expansion over the years, particularly from the 1950s to the 1990s, due to the socio-economical changes brought about by the development of a new China. The prioritisation of economic acceleration led to an overwhelming demand for fluent English speakers. This further gave rise to heavy borrowing from the Soviet Union mode of foreign language education which meant sole emphasis on developing language skills (Adamson, 2004; Wu, 2009). Over 1000 Chinese universities launched their English major programmes during those 40 years. Given the extremely uneven social and economic variables in such a vast country, the effectiveness of these 1000+ English departments has been far from standardised. It goes without saying that some of these 1000+ English major programmes perhaps should not have been launched, since they lacked a sufficient number of qualified teachers and could not attract high caliber students to undertake relevant studies with expected levels of performance. Nevertheless, it is far from true to conclude that the English major programme is in crisis because any academic subject in any country accelerating its development to a similar scale in a short period of time would have to confront similar impediments. If the English major program were in crisis, by definition all other academic programmes would be categorised as in crisis too and so would the entire Chinese higher education system.

Secondly, it is open to question whether or not the individual netizens or respondents whose comments were analysed in Chen (2019) truly understand what English major programmes are. The general public in China often misunderstand English major programmes as being equivalent to the English language education provided by socially recognised private training institutions, or College English Teaching, which essentially refers to English language proficiency courses taught to non-English majors at the tertiary level (Bolton & Graddol, 2012). These two comparisons are ill chosen as they focus on nothing but the improvement of English language skills, yet have not yielded satisfactory results (Qu, 2012; Du & Guan, 2016). This has led to the English major programme being incorrectly regarded as the further enhancement of English proficiency, an upgrade or a premium version of the existing options, if one may say so (Hu, 2008). It can be well argued that the

comments of the netizens in Chen's article may have been rooted in these misunderstandings. Surely it is undeniable that these comments might help refine the development of the English major programme in response to social development, but universities are geared to higher missions to generate and promote thoughts and values, not subservient to the views of a particular group of people.

Lastly, the fundamental reason behind the debate about the so-called English major crisis is, in essence, a confusion with regard to the direction of English major programmes in China: should they be more practical or more humanistic? A historical review of the development of English major programmes in China reveals that the long-term focus on practical English skills has had detrimental results. A superfluity of graduates who have no expertise other than spoken English is the case in point. Though alternatives were once considered, such as the compound major which pairs the learning of English skills with another major (law, business, journalism, finance, and so on), they proved to be unsustainable compromises (Liu & Wu, 2015). We do believe that undergraduates are entitled to the acquisition of practical skills which help prepare them in securing future employment. However, university education, after all, needs to cultivate humanistic values among students so that we can develop future leaders to serve our communities and guide them forward. Therefore, humanistic values are integral to university education and a humanistic approach to developing the English major programme is indispensable.

It is therefore imperative, from our perspective, that the English major programme as an academic subject should be considered a valid part of Humanities education. Consequently, the curriculum, syllabi, learning outcomes and resources should be designed, arranged and implemented based on the fundamental premise that the study of English language and literature, culture, philosophy etc. are not intended merely for the purpose of acquiring English language skills, but for the development of the critical and speculative capabilities necessary to study human society and culture. In the following two sections we firstly argue why the English major is a humanities subject and then present a pioneering reform aiming to bring the English major programme back to its humanistic basics at Shanghai International Studies University (henceforth SISU) in China.

English major as a Humanities subject

Humanities, in contrast to the study of divinity during the Renaissance, effectively referred to what

we know now as the Classics. Currently the term is often utilised to refer to subjects on the contrary side of natural sciences, sometimes social sciences, and professional training. Employing mainly non-empirical approaches, Humanities encompass ancient and modern languages, literature, philosophy, history, law, religion, art etc. This wide range of academic disciplines aims to establish a knowledge repertoire which collectively represents the humanistic spirit and investigates the inner world and cultural world that human beings create, the very core being humanism (Hu & Sun, 2006; Jin, 2010). As far as education is concerned, humanities disciplines aim for the development of integrity and virtue, the cultivation of humanistic spirit and dedication, and the safeguarding of social justice. It is not an exaggeration to state that the development of Humanities education plays a vital role in building a nation's image, conviction and values (Zhang, 2003).

In Chinese universities, when majors in Chinese study Chinese Language and Literature, this has no difficulty in being recognised as a Humanities subject. We argue that English Language and Literature or the English major programme should receive similar recognition. Unlike Chinese majors, whose language proficiency poses no challenge for their reading of ancient and contemporary Chinese literature, English majors, limited by their English proficiency upon entering university, have to spend a preparatory period of time strengthening and refining their English literacy, before studying subject-related humanities courses (Zha, 2018). In other words, the learning of English skills acts simply as a minimum threshold and medium, but by no means the core or ultimate goal of studying English Language and Literature as an academic subject.

As a Humanities subject, the English major programme possesses two quintessential properties: humanistic and academic. On the one hand, the programme is humanistic because it has the provision of a whole person education as its ultimate objective. Classroom teaching no longer concentrates on English grammar and vocabulary, but instead the dynamic interaction between text, culture and thought. An accurate analysis of language is conducive to the thorough understanding of the author's attitudes and emotions. Vice-versa, an empathetic sensitivity to the author's thoughts and sentiments increases the learners' awareness of the nuanced and skillful use of language (Li, 1993). On the other hand, a Humanities-based curriculum organically integrating the learning of language, literature and culture characterises the

academic distinctiveness of this subject. Courses should be designed within the Humanities framework so as to contribute to the development of Humanities graduates in terms of the attainment of subject knowledge and transferrable skills.

A Humanities approach to the English major programme cannot be realised through an ill designed combination of language skill courses and Humanities courses. The previous national guidelines for the English major programme (published in 2000) in China used to draw an arbitrary line between the first two years and the last two years of a four-year undergraduate programme, specifying different learning outcomes for these two stages. Such crude division, which disregarded the principles of a Humanities education, was utterly problematic. A Humanities approach would suggest that courses such as reading, writing, speaking and listening should be taught with the intent of instilling humanistic values while developing critical, independent and innovative capabilities. Through studying authentic materials closely, students develop language proficiency, which is to be viewed as a by-product, not the dominant undertaking of the course itself.

Furthermore, a Humanities-based approach to the English major programme indicates that the curriculum should be designed within a comparative framework. Not only should courses such as British and American Literature, Literary Theory, Linguistics, Translation Practice, History of English-Speaking Countries be made compulsory, but also those which offer a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary perspective are worthy of inclusion. The exploration students conduct in the process of learning Comparative Literature, History of Western Civilisation, History of Chinese Civilisation, Western Philosophy, and Chinese Philosophy is to a great extent beneficial in increasing their intercultural communication abilities and broadening their vision as global citizens. English majors in China have long been criticised for a lack of critical acumen, which is largely caused by the absence of a systematic training in Humanities methodology. By learning how to read literary texts from both western and Chinese perspectives, students learn to participate proactively in discovering and creating and in using rigorously analytical methods to transform emotional experiences into rational understandings (Wang, 2002; Zha, 2012). We shall now present the effort to reform the English major programme at SISU as an example to promote a Humanities approach to the English major programme development.

Return to the Humanities: the SISU experience

The reform of the English major programme at SISU can be seen as an institutional response to the deterioration in the quality of graduates from the English Departments in many Chinese universities. Having realised that expanding enrolment was not the answer to improving the quality of English education and that the key was to reposition the English major as an academic subject, the School of English Studies at SISU took the initiative by embarking on a drive to bring the English major back into the field of the Humanities.

The 'Return to the Humanities' reform has been ongoing since 2010. The main ethos is to establish a consistent perception as to the type of graduates that the School aims to develop. Being part of a prestigious university, nationally respected for foreign language teaching and learning, the School had higher aims: to develop elite intellectuals with solid English language proficiency, profound understanding of Humanities subject knowledge, broad international vision, competitive cross-cultural communication skills, critical acumen, creativity and leadership. To achieve such aims, an up-to-date curriculum and appropriate teaching pedagogy had to be in place.

Reform of the curriculum

The curriculum reform was implemented in three areas. Firstly, existing courses were optimised with a more evident presence of humanistic learning outcomes. For instance, *Appreciation of Biblical Stories* was changed into *Bible Studies and Western Culture* to emphasise the learning of culture via Biblical texts. Secondly, liberal arts courses were increased and systematized. New courses were added to the existing four areas of study (Western Culture, Literature, Linguistics and Translation Studies), such as *Comparative Literature*, *History of English*, *Western Philosophy*, *History of Western Civilisation*, *History of Art*, *Introduction to Cultural Studies*, *History of English-Speaking Countries* etc. These new courses set out to help deepen students' understanding of English-speaking countries from different perspectives. Lastly, two additional areas of study, 'Reading Classics in Humanities and Social Sciences' and 'Chinese Culture', were introduced. The former encompasses detailed readings of representative works in linguistics, literary theory, philosophy, theology, psychology and politics, in the hope of immersing students in the essence of great thought throughout recorded

human history. The latter aims to teach ancient and contemporary Chinese culture, literature, history and religion in English so that students would be equipped with the ability to introduce Chinese culture on a global stage, as well as a kind of cross-cultural awareness especially useful in a multilingual and multicultural context.

A series of lectures was also introduced, as a supplement to students' compulsory courses. World-renowned scholars in various humanistic disciplines are invited to give lectures particularly tailored to students of this School. Ranging from literature to culture, from discussions about interdisciplinary topics to state-of-art research methodologies, these lectures are designed to widen students' knowledge of humanities and develop their creative and critical thinking abilities.

Shift of the pedagogy

As stated previously, the Humanities approach towards developing the English major programme differs from a simple combination of language and humanistic subject courses. What truly matters is the integration and consilience of the courses. An updated curriculum would not work if the classroom pedagogy remained unchanged. Therefore, the School advocated applying humanistic principles to the pedagogy and meanwhile consolidating language proficiency in humanistic subject courses, allowing students to acquire subject knowledge and maintain language competence simultaneously. Teachers are thus required to associate textbook contents with humanistic thinking in language courses whilst paying attention to students' reading and writing literacy in humanistic subject courses.

This shift in pedagogy presented significant challenges to the academic staff of the School. A number of steps were therefore taken in order to prepare teachers for the implementation of the new curriculum. Teachers were given funding to enable them to conduct research on pedagogy either individually or as a group. Their research experience and personal reflections were shared in staff meetings. Each year a special seminar on the reform was held in the School and all academic staff were encouraged to submit and present their research papers on topics concerning pedagogical innovation in the process of steering the English major programme back to the Humanities.

Improvement of materials

Additionally, funding at departmental and university levels was provided so as to support teachers writing new textbooks in accordance with the

newly updated learning outcomes. Textbooks for language courses were rewritten with an aim of improving English skills through studying texts of humanistic themes. A case in point would be the redesigning of the textbooks for a compulsory English reading course. Instead of focusing on grammar and vocabulary in separate and abridged passages only, texts of different literary genres were selected and edited into each chapter of this theme-based reading textbook. Students would be reading classical satirical essays, short stories and poems with themes such as life and death, youth and age, nature and nurture, liberty and responsibility etc. The themes were arranged in this way so that heated discussions might be generated and traditional teacher-fronted classroom dynamic would hence be transformed to a student-fronted learning ecology.

The year 2020 marks the tenth year of this ongoing reform project. The number of selective courses in Humanities subjects has increased from fewer than ten to over 70. The graduate employment rate has been growing steadily and the student satisfaction rate has also been soaring, as evidenced in the annual survey taken by the fourth-year students. It is with confidence that we argue the English major programme can be promoted as part of the Humanities successfully and can thrive as long as it is considered as a Humanities subject. The era of prioritising fluency in English at the expense of a more rounded cultural knowledge is long behind us. The prejudice that the English major has the sole purpose of learning the English language can only be eradicated if a correct understanding of the nature of this subject is achieved.

Conclusion

The acutely felt dilemma of disciplinary identity is witnessed not only within English departments in China but also globally. The survival of modern languages and literature disciplines has long been the subject of debate. Though ‘the study of foreign languages, literatures and linguistics is a distinct discipline with a distinct humanist mission in American education . . . our disciplinary role has been largely obscured by a focus on the surface issues rather than the first principles that would allow us to rectify our mission within our institutions and to rightsize our programs’ (Swaffar, 1999: 155). ‘Rightsizing’ may have different connotations in different countries, but the sentiments are shared universally. The need to establish a widespread awareness to voice and put into

practice a coherent vision of this academic subject now is more pressing than ever. The unsatisfactory performance of the majority of the 1000+ English majors does not force us to recoil. On the contrary, it is just what is needed to motivate us to reassert the fundamental humanistic nature of the English major programme and to strive to improve its delivery.

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