

Transformation of American FL Departments and Reforms of English Major Education in China

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Abstract. The paper reviews and analyzes in full length the problems American FL departments have been facing in the new millennium, and the solutions proposed by the MLA executive committee. And then it argues that China's English major education suffers in similar ways but its reforms take place in differing contexts. In view of this, the author believes what American FL education community is doing should be applicable to China. The 9/11 terrorist attack and a series of ensuing geopolitical events have caused Americans to realize that the whole nation is in the danger of "language deficit". As a result, the troubled American FL education started to make changes under the leadership of Modern Language Association. The problems in collegiate FL programs were soon identified, which include the shortsighted program goal, the dissociated curricula, the biased faculty power structure, shortage of qualified teachers and the flawed teacher development plans and so on. Years' efforts have paid off with valuable proposals and recommendations. The American FL education authorities resolve to set trans-lingual and trans-cultural competence (TTC) as the ultimate goal, eradicate language-content divide in the FL curricula, transform FL departments by balancing power between language instructors and literature professors, and develop qualified teaching faculty through redefining qualifications for FL professors. By contrast, China's FL teaching reforms have taken place in a different context where the needs of learners and employers have always been top priority. Driven by instrumentalist ideology, which has been under constant criticism for its deviation from constitutive nature of language study, China's English major education, although achieved some success after more than three decades' improvement, was born with a number of defects. The monolingual goal, which has not been challenged until recently, needs more scrutinize, and the curricula are also bothered by the language-content divide. The teaching faculty is frustrated by the research first teaching second phenomenon. However, what happens in US should be relevant and meaningful to its counterparts in China.

Keywords: American FL departments; English major; teaching reforms; Trans-cultural and Trans-lingual Competence; curricula; faculty development

1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, Sino-US higher education institutions have more opportunities to exchange teaching philosophy than ever before. For obvious reasons, Chinese colleges and universities have tried in many meaningful ways to learn from their American counterparts in the past three decades. Now the transformation of American FL departments launched years ago should be relevant and meaningful to China's collegiate English major education which is the very important side of China's FL education on college campuses. The paper aims to review problems American collegiate FL education faces and the way out it has proposed and implemented afterwards, and provide some reflective thinking about the continuing innovations in which China's undergraduate English programs have been enthusiastically engaged over the past thirty years.

2. Transformation Of American FL Departments

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American Collegiate FL education has been in different crises in the past four decades [1], but the post-9/11 American FL departments have been facing more serious challenges and problems. With ever-increasing involvement in Afghanistan and Iraq wars, the American public came to realize that the nation was in the dilemma of “language deficit” [2]. Under such an urgent circumstance, Modern Language Association shoulders the responsibility of transforming American FL departments. As early as in the spring of 2004, the MLA executive council assigned ad hoc committee on foreign languages chaired by Mary L. Pratt, the former president of the Association, to help formulate an agenda for FL and cultural education from the tertiary education perspective. The initiatives were aimed to assess issues mainly concerning language policy, disciplinary research, institutional organization, curricula and pedagogy. In 2007, the Executive Council issued a position paper, “Foreign Languages and Higher Education: New Structures for a Changed World,” which is based on the ad hoc committee’s report produced the year before and marks the substantial beginning of the American collegiate FL education reforms.

The position paper points out bluntly that American collegiate FL departments have a series of problems from the shortsighted program goal, the dissociated curricula, biased faculty power structure, shortage of qualified teachers to flawed teacher development plans. Considering these profound challenges, “... foreign language departments, if they are to be meaningful players in higher education -- or, indeed, if they are to thrive as autonomous units -- must transform their programs and structure [2].”

American FL programs tend to set the competence of educated native speakers as the goal, “a utopian objective” [3] [4] “that post-adolescent learners rarely fulfill [5]”; while the idea of trans-lingual and trans-cultural competence (TTC) proposed by the Executive Council as the ultimate goal of FL programs emphasizes on learners’ multilingual ability to operate between languages, thus sound more realistic and practical. To be specific, TTC refers to the ability of communicating with educated native speakers in target language and reflecting on the world and themselves from foreign perspectives so as to understand speakers of the target language and position themselves as Americans. The deviation from monolingual competence to TTC underscores the importance of teaching systematically differences in meaning, mentality, and worldview as expressed in American English and in the target language. It goes beyond the call of American national security and defense agendas which configures foreign language study in a narrow manner. As a result, learning a foreign language provides learners not only with a tool to communicate thoughts and information but also with a new perspective to perceive, reflect and express.

The second problem, which has seldom been noticed by academic circle, lies in the FL curricula that are characterized by a division between language courses for the first two or three years of the program and literature subjects for the sequential one or two years. The very configuration has been canonical and taken for granted. Due to lack of coordination between the two types of courses, however, there comes naturally the dissociation between language and content, and consequently at some doctorate granting institutions, language instructors and literature professors have no or very little “cooperation or even exchange [2]”. For this reason, the proposed curricula should be integrative in language study and content learning, which enables language to be “learned as content and content as language” [2]. In other words, language study should be situated in cultural, historical, geographical, and cross-cultural frames within the context of humanistic learning; besides, the four-year curricula to be created should be coherent integrating trans-cultural content and trans-lingual reflection at every level [5].

Of course, the direct outcome of the language/content divide is the damaging separation between language instructors in non-tenure track positions and tenure-track literature professors. On the one hand, language lectures that have classroom experience are put outside of departmental power structure; on the other hand, the literature professors who do not have “the expertise to effectively change classroom practices [6]” are privileged in designing the curricula. Unfortunately, within such a governance structure of language departments, the former has to take the order from the latter. The frustration the language instructors have experienced is imaginable, and the antagonism, however, is not towards the study of literature per se but towards dominance of literature study over language teaching which “impedes the development of a unified language and content curriculum across the four-year sequence [2].

To address the long-standing problem, the position paper suggests that FL departments should be immediately transformed by revamping the two-tiered power structure. Firstly, the new courses and the program should be the joint-efforts from languages instructors and literature professors. In this regard, Carnegie Mellon University has set a good example. In the year 2003, it started a campaign of changing the titles Senior Lecturer and Principal Lecturer to Associate Teaching Professor and Teaching Professor, respectively; and the language instructors in CMU have “the authority to design their own courses and to contribute to the design for the whole language program [7].” Secondly, FL departments can employ new personnel trained in media, area studies, performance studies, film, religion, art history and language acquisition in order to guarantee the TTC goal [2]. As a response to the position paper, Schechtman and Koser [8] propose that one of the methods to translate the idea of cooperation be to “implement scaled forms of team teaching between language instructors -- graduate students or adjuncts -- and full-time faculty”. It means language teaching is conducted with presence of full time professors “to facilitate the close analysis of culture, history, politics, and literature”, and advanced content courses are taught with involvement of language instructors “to promote a continuous engagement with and reflection on language among advanced learners.”

As to the issue of qualified FL teachers and teacher development plans, the major concerns involve the following aspects. To begin with, graduate studies in doctorate granting institutions where future FL faculty are produced “should provide substantive training in language teaching and in the use of new technologies in addition to cultivating extensive disciplinary knowledge and strong analytic and writing skills. [2]” Then the FL departments must make clear the qualifications a FL professor should possess, which, according to Pfeiffer [6], are “primarily located within the courses of language instruction”, namely, “language in use”. Put it in another way, FL professors should have ability to teach and study language and language use from aesthetical, cultural, linguistic, and social point of view [9]. What is more, apart from putting those trained in fields like media, area studies, performance studies, film, religion, and art history in hiring posts, the present in-service faculty, and the tenure-track professors in particular, should receive necessary language teaching training so as to improve classroom practice [6]. And at the language instructor side, the foreign native teachers to be hired must have some general training in relevant areas so that they can deal with the courses which have emphasis on content [5].

In addition to the above-mentioned recommendations which are considered the most important by the Executive Council, the position paper also lists five other priorities, among which two are worth considering [5]. Firstly, there is a strange phenomenon in FL departments that programs in translation and interpretation as the ideal context for TTC are not in the mainstream of FL education, while there is a desperate need of “translators and interpreters with strong educational background”. Secondly, it is necessary to design intensified programs for highly-motivated talented language learners and capstone courses for students just returning from the country of target language.

To sum up, the transformation of American FL departments is an all-round undertaking full of challenges. The difficulty and resistance in the course of transformation is tremendous, but there is no alternative. Otherwise, FL departments in US would lose the leading position in advanced learning education in foreseeable future, and students would go to language training facilities, “where instrumental learning will eclipse the deep intellectual and cultural learning that takes place on college campuses [2].” Fortunately, from 2006 to 2009 enrollments in courses of languages other than English in United States institutions of higher education continued to increase significantly by 6.6% from 1,577,810 to 1,682,627 [10]. This explains the undisputable usefulness of learning a language other than English in the context of globalization and in the post 9/11 environment on the one hand [2], and the fact that the transformation launched nearly 3 years ago has started to take effect on the other. Furthermore, the innovative ideas and reasonable measures in the transformation are meaningful and “applicable to other contexts and countries [2].”

3. Teaching Reforms of English Major in China

As a developing country, China has attached great importance to FL education since 1980s [11]. Around in mid-1950s, due to the deterioration of Sino-Soviet relations, there was swift shift from Russian to English in foreign languages taught on campuses. English major started to gain developmental momentum but soon

met resistance with suspension at one time even in some higher learning institution of foreign languages in the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) [12]. When English major education, like other foreign language programs, sought to make changes in order to meet the demands of the national opening-up policy, it was trapped in a situation where no curricula, teaching programs or course books were available [13]. With enormous efforts in the past three decades, however, China's collegiate FL teaching, English major education in particular, has scored remarkable achievements [13]. Firstly, undergraduate English programs have expanded to the higher education institutions of natural science, engineering, medical study, agriculture and business rather than were narrowly confined previously in humanities and liberal arts colleges, foreign language higher learning institutions or comprehensive universities. Secondly, advanced English programs developed very fast and the number of BA degree-granting institutions soared in the past 30 years. Statistics show that nearly 900 offered BA programs in English by 2007 with enrollments amounting to 400,000 [14] [13], and as many as 208 and 29 higher learning institutions grant MA and Ph. D in English study respectively [12].

But the rapid expansion of English major, one of the most favorite programs in college for decades, has ended up with a considerable number of worries and problems. The recent severe employment situation it has been going through is but one of them [15]. As a matter of fact, there have been a series of long-standing issues profoundly reflected and heatedly debated for years in English teaching community [15] [16] [12] [13] [17] [18]. The recent setback in the job market just puts these issues in the center of the ring. The discussion or debate, like in US, is mainly centered on the nature of English major situated in academic disciplines, its ultimate goals, curricula and faculty development and the like. Consequently the scenario of transformation of American collegiate FL departments can, in large, serve as a good reference for their Chinese counterparts where English programs take the lion's share.

As is known to all, traditional English major in China is characterized by teaching of English language, culture and literature courses. This model is basically consistent with universal understanding of foreign language programs held by American academic community, which sets language study in the fields of literature, cultural and area studies [2], so English major is understood as a typically humanistic study with instrumental values. The current English major in China, however, has deviated from the above-mentioned widely-accepted model and turned to overemphasize the importance of its instrumentalist side [15]. In a position paper [19] issued by the Ministry of Education of PRC in 1998, a foreign language was defined as "a skill in essence, or a medium. Only if it is combined with another program expressed by the very medium, it can stand as an autonomous major." Guided by this ideology, the New Curricula [20] for English majors issued soon after in 2000 by the Ministry of Education underscores in articulated language the significance of combining English and relevant programs or courses of other fields such as journalism, business, finance, law or tourism in order to produce so called "21st century interdisciplinary talents". The trial model, pioneered by some key universities in the mid-eighties and soon popularized nationwide [13], achieved some success as the graduates trained in this model were stronger in English skills than their peers majoring in other relevant fields due to the weaknesses in teaching of EFL for non-English majors, thus more popular in job markets. This is the case when China's economy was becoming increasingly export-oriented. But when great progress has been made in reforms of FL (mainly English) teaching for non-English majors, the previous advantages English major graduates enjoyed is gone and their lack of enough expertise in other relevant fields is comparatively striking. As a result, it is not surprising that English major graduates have been gradually disfavored by employers. The rooted cause for the popularity decline is that English programs in such a particular model have blurred the legitimate position of English study as a time-honored discipline and thus has been reduced into "a major without any major", i.e. something being neither fish nor fowl [18]. Therefore, some scholars suggest that English major need a thorough reform [21] and call for a humanistic return [15] [16].

As far as the ultimate goal of English major is concerned, instrumentalist view in language learning, which characterizes "freestanding language schools and some campus language-resource centers [2]", sets undergraduate English programs in a deviated direction and deeply influences curricula design, textbook development and pedagogical choices. The predominant mission of the current undergraduate English major incarnated in the New Curricula is to produce talents with "solid language skills, broad cultural knowledge

and interdisciplinary expertise” [20]. Here the interdisciplinarity is the core element in the whole program, which becomes an important gauge for learners’ professional competence and directly gives rise to the formulation of the program model mentioned above. The New Curricula, therefore, brings practicality of learning into fore and overshadows the humanistic value of English study [16]. It thus lowers the academic function of higher learning institutions and fails the mission of producing advanced language learners.

The second point about the goal is its monolingual attribute, which is apparently different from the newly-proposed goal of American collegiate FL program: trans-lingual and trans-cultural competence (TTC). The New Curricula, although, mentions development of learners’ competence in translation which involves study of the source language and the target language, it does not justify the usefulness of studying Chinese and its culture in the programs. Neglect of education in mother language and culture in an EFL program certainly impedes learners from acquiring advanced cultural and lingual competence. So the argument over the ultimate goal of English major falls onto the question – what type of talents does China need? There is no doubt about the fact that to offer a language program is to meet the social needs. Do these social needs only reside in economical development or national security agendas or both? The question is worth discussing especially when China has been rising as a potential superpower in the world and she will have more engagement in international affairs and cross-cultural interactions with other nations.

As for the English major curricula, which serve the only reliable means to guarantee the realization of the program goal, it suffers as well. The New Curricula divides all courses into three types: courses (67%) of English skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating), courses (15%) of English culture and language, and courses (18%) of other relevant fields [20]. The allocation of class hours to each of them in the above parentheses shows the curricula does not represent constitutive nature of language study, i.e. humanistic education. What is worse, in reality, the courses of English culture and language, which makes up the lowest percentage, are often encroached by courses of other relevant fields no matter how they are assigned as required or selective [16]. Besides, the language-content divide, found in American collegiate FL curricula, is also obvious and alarming. The coordination between the three types of courses does not exist, or very little, if any.

The last concern is about teaching faculty which involves teacher’s power and qualification and teacher development. Although there is no obvious power polarization in English departments, as seen in US [6], the chasm is noticeable and frustrating between language lectures who are mainly engaged in teaching mission and privileged professors (in the post-graduate institutions in particular) whose primary job is to undertake academic research. As a common practice, teachers’ professional promotion is largely based on their publications and research projects in all higher learning institutions of China. The emphasis itself on research capabilities invites little criticism but it has brought about a damaging side-effect: institutional undervaluation of teachers’ teaching competence in their career development like what has happened to language instructors in American collegiate FL departments. The cries of grievance about the unfair practice have been yelled out from time to time by those who are comparatively poor in research but quite strong in teaching. But the voices have been hardly heard due to their humble position in the community. This part of faculty see little hope of title advancement, but have to take orders from department chiefs or professors who do not necessarily have expertise in classroom. And the research first teaching second phenomenon has continued concomitantly with production model of qualified teachers by high degree granting universities. Like in US again, Ph. D. or MA degree holders specializing in literature, translation or area studies have little training in language teaching theories before they are employed, and the employers see the candidate’s research competence more important than their language competence and teaching skills. This may be part of reasons why English teachers in China do not have enough English to have free interaction, which is a prerequisite for implementation of Communicative Language Teaching [22]. In spite of differing institutional mechanisms established to improve in-service teachers’ classroom performance, the situation will not change substantially in the near future if teaching competence continues to be undervalued either in recruitment of new employees or in academic promotion.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, the transformation of American FL departments and teaching reforms of undergraduate English programs in China are conducted in varying context, but they resemble in many ways. To begin with, the autonomous transformation is responses to the call of American national security agendas and an educational reform to help USA better communicate with other cultures as a world leader. It urges a cultural turn in curricula and pedagogy, and meanwhile it takes drastic moves to streamline FL departments through mobilizing all positive factors. By contrast, China's teaching reforms of undergraduate English programs is only driven by needs of society, namely, needs of job market [15] without consideration of national security strategy or man's intellectual development. Therefore, instrumentalist ideology pervades in every aspect of the undergraduate English programs from program goal, curricula to pedagogy. That is why the nearly ten-year-long argument over the nature of English study as a major is still unresolved [17]. With successful reforms in English teaching for non-English majors, nevertheless, it is time for Chinese colleges and universities to liberate English major education by removing the imposed content of other fields and returning to the traditional model which sets language learning in the background of cultural, literary and area study. In addition, Trans-lingual Trans-cultural Competence (TTC) as the goal of American collegiate FL programs urges Chinese academia to have critical thinking on the monolingual and interdisciplinary goal of English major education. The goal may be appropriate when China's FL education is aimed to serve the economic purposes, but now it looks earthly and shortsighted under the circumstances where the national security strategy is called for consideration as China increasingly participates in international affairs as a leading role. And the proposals and recommendations for the problems concerning language-content divide, teaching-research relationship and faculty development in American FL departments should be also implicational to China's English major education.

5. Acknowledgment

The paper is sponsored by the 2008 Teaching Research Projects of Anhui Province. The Project Serial No. is 2008jyxm368.

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