On the Main Trends of English Majors in Chinese Universities About the Teaching of British and American Literature

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Abstract. This paper analyzes the current situation of English teaching in Chinese colleges and universities from the macro level, and points out that there are two different trends in the teaching of English majors in Chinese colleges and universities (Applied English and English Major). The paper takes British and American literature courses as the topic of the discussion, and puts forward views on the subject orientation. The paper advocates two concepts: making study serve the practical purpose & learning to know; emphasizes the humanism of English major; and proposes forward-looking thinking. But at the same time, it also faces both the present teaching situation and practical ability of colleges, and puts forward the suggestion of the dual system.

Keywords: English teaching; Literature teaching; Applied subjects; Humanities

Introduction: Present situation: the main trends of English teaching

Foreign language is a special major, because it has two characteristics: both the instrumental side, but also the human side. Because of this, it can be treated as an applied discipline or the humanities. At present, the definition of English major is vague and broad in Chinese colleges, which causes a lot of controversy and misunderstanding. In the specific teaching, there are two different trends. In order to discuss easily, we might as well call the two different trends of Applied English and English Major. The former takes the language skill training as the main means, with the ability to use the language as the main target; the latter takes humanities connotation as the main teaching contents and it is mainly for cultivating cultural communication ability and international vision rather than specifically for the application of the language.

According to the author's observation, many colleges and universities choose the Applied English teaching, few universities choose English Major. There are some hesitation in the middle ground. There exist different levels of colleges and universities, and each one should find itself a clear position. In this
way the other aspects can be arranged well, such as the structure of teachers, teaching design, and course arrangement. At the same time, the teaching syllabus for English majors should be adjusted accordingly. In this way, some colleges and universities take finding-job as the teaching guide, mainly to develop the students' ability to use English; others highlight the advantages of foreign language teaching and cultivate cross-cultural operation ability. Of course, any English Major in Colleges and universities need to improve the students' ability to use the language and cultivate their humanities.

Classification refers to the relative professional focus rather than be quite distinct from each other. Language is an integral part of national civilization, so the scope of foreign language is far beyond the service function as a carrier. Because of this, even in English speaking countries, College English major is a traditional and strong one, as that of Chinese in many Chinese colleges.

1 Recognition. Advocate both making study serve the practical purpose and learning to know

Based on the current situation of English teaching in Chinese colleges and universities, this paper emphasizes more on the humanistic aspect of English majors, in order to balance the current widespread emphasis on skills and contempt for humanity. We can use a case study—British and American literature. The main component of English departments in the United States and the United Kingdom is literature, which is similar to the Chinese Department in Chinese universities.

However, many colleges and universities in China's foreign language departments, the arrangement of the literature class is like doing a loss. Even with the occasional use of literary works, it will only be used as a template for the application of language and the humanities of the works are usually ignored. The reasons for the phenomenon of “emphasizing language skills and ignoring the literature” are very simple, because language is closely linked with practice. From the university leadership to the students, a question is often mentioned: what is the use of literature? Behind this common problem, there is a wrong logic premise, that is, "use" is a measure of "learning". The relationship between "learning" and "use" is indeed a practical and personal consideration which is closely related with jobs and other interests. At the same time, it is a level of subjects. If people think that the only right track is to teach practical skills in higher education, then there is a serious deviation in the understanding of higher education, because people's quality training, rather than skill training, is the primary task of higher education.

Moreover, human knowledge is not limited to the application. Universities, especially research universities, should explicitly put forward the "learning to know" slogan against education pragmatism and encourage the free airing of views. Special skills training, including the ability to use foreign languages, can gradually give way to Vocational Colleges. In essence, the literature is not a course to be used, but one to be known. The really valuable literary works, through the experience of language art feedback, provide a channel to know people and society. Its influences are indirect and profound; spiritual level rather than material level; and subtle everywhere. The importance of British and
American literature courses is not only to help learn language. The endurance of British literature lies in its literary and cultural power. British and American literature is an important part of Western culture. It is very difficult to achieve effective communication in the context of globalization without understanding these "useless" things. The use of literature is its uselessness – the uselessness is often of great use. We can even emphasize its practical use of literature, that is to say, the literature works have not only the humanistic spirit and aesthetic value inside, but also great enlightenment meanings. Literary works can reflect the social reality and true life and change the social status.

Literary works will continue to show the great significance in transforming national spiritual and cultural qualities. However, the teaching of English Majors in colleges and universities in our country has exposed the serious tendency of emphasizing skills and neglecting humanities. According to the English Teaching Syllabus of Universities in 2000 (hereinafter referred to as the syllabus), the literature courses should be taught in grade three and four, two hours a week. Compared with the courses of language skills, the literary courses only play a minor role.

II. Reposition: setting up the authority of humanities

A lot of research has shown that a lot of colleges are influenced by the theory of tool. From the leadership to the students, they generally think that learning English is intended to use it, therefore their language level has been downgraded to language skills: just listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation; the teaching focus is only on the training of skills; and the courses to improve students’ humanistic quality have been neglected. The literary courses have gradually been replaced by some practical ones, such as Business English and Practical Translation. The literary works have been pushed into a corner and struggled to survive. If without the syllabus, the literary courses may disappear. There exist some opinions of impetuous and short-sighted pragmatism, such as focus on practice rather than quality; focus on technology rather than arts.

based on a general survey of English teaching in institutions of higher learning in China, points out that there exist two diverse tendencies in administering the teaching of English, which, for the purpose of discussion, the author names as “Discipline of Applied English” and “Discipline of English Language and Literature”, and further discusses the disciplinary nature of English, using English literature courses as a case of illustration. The paper emphasizes “study for the purpose of knowing” alongside with “study for the purpose of application” as the guiding principle of university education and calls for returning English to its place as a discipline of humanities. The paper ends with some forward-looking suggestions regarding its future development.

In view of the issue, some experts and scholars warn and call for the restoration of the status of literary courses. They should play an important or even dominant role in English curriculum. In the investigation, the conclusion is consistent with the above opinions—although we have greatly improved both the teaching materials and methods, the students’ interest in literature is on the
wane, which makes people feel disappointed. The enthusiasm of teachers and the indifference of students have formed great contrast. The teachers’ input cannot be rewarded. It seems that the problems come from the students, but it is not the case. In fact, students are easy to accept the influences from various aspects, and their expectations and interests are guided by social and public opinions. Social environment can bring negative effects. The lack of correct guidance from college leaders and teachers can make students fall into misunderstanding. We often say that there are many people who know English in China, but few of them can discuss or communicate with others in the international context. This phenomenon is related to the current tendency of language training to emphasize language skills. Although the harm of educational pragmatism is not apparent, it has a long-term effect. Each college should make it clear: the goal of your English major—learn to know or use only. Do you think it as Applied English or English major, applied or a humanity one subject?

Then the college may design teaching activities according to its directions and teaching abilities. If it is determined as an applied subject, we cannot completely reject its cultural connotation. If it is determined as a humanity subject, English should remain its basic application function. But they have different emphases. In principle, vocational training should not be the responsibility of institutions of higher education, but now it does not meet the reality of higher education in China. But on the other hand, undergraduate education in colleges and universities is gradually from the professional education to improving the quality of the general education.

We have to reconsider the requirements of English teaching design. For the research universities, in the process of globalization today, we have no reason to think of language as a mere tool: we only value the function of the communicative function of English, while ignoring the humanity and thoughts in it. Once again, we return to the topic of British and American literature. The foreign language departments cannot reject or compress British and American literature teaching, instead they need to develop the resource, let literature teaching become the real backbone of English teaching, so as to improve the students’ cultural quality, literature appreciation and language expression ability, and cultivate their humanistic-care consciousness and noble aesthetic taste. Students should have a keen ability to experience life. Fundamentally speaking, the humanistic spirits are more important than the words in literary works, because the spiritual and cultural aspects of the literary works can exert a subtle influence on students.

In the light of the ideas of University, this paper, based on the debates which there has been in the past two centuries in Britain, explores that the education of humanities plays a very important role in the development of English major in the Chinese University. It investigates some problems which now exist in Chinese universities concerning the idea of concerning the English Major, the school’s curriculum and the methodology for teaching and studying English and American Literature. Meanwhile this paper puts forward some suggestions on solving the above problems.
III. Conclusion
The position of foreign literature in English teaching reflects people's attitude towards higher education. Institutions of higher learning have different levels, such as cutting-edge, elite, ordinary, skills, vocations etc., and each has its own teaching purpose. Therefore, foreign language colleges and universities should clarify their own ideas. In other words, not every college should focus on employment skills. It is unnecessary for each college to locate itself as a service to the role of the job market, especially in the fierce job competition today.

The purpose of education should not be arbitrarily twisted under the pressure at any time. If we take English major as the humanities, then we focus on not only language skills, but should let the students get beyond the application, including cultural vision, sound personality, imagination ability, creative ability, communication ability, observation ability, thinking ability, judgment ability, and the ability to feel. It does not belong to a special art, but something more important than practical skills. We call the abstract thing comprehensive quality today. The study of foreign literature is an important part to improve the overall quality of human beings. In the current educational environment, we can combine them together—to open the door for English to be used as a tool; and emphasize the authority of its humanities. In the name of English subject, we adopt Applied English in some ordinary colleges and universities, and at the same time emphasize the humanities education in some research universities.

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Literature References