Opportunities and Challenges for English Major in Polytechnic Colleges under the National Standards

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Abstract: The survival of English major as a discipline is facing serious challenge due to saturation. Many polytechnic universities and colleges tried to equip their English major with certain special traits, which is, however, quite controversial. With a careful analysis of the upcoming National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate English Majors, this paper attempts to clarify the opportunities and challenges for many polytechnic universities and colleges to develop their English Major with specialty and distinctive characteristics. The opportunities lie in the legitimacy of feature courses acknowledged and institutionalized by the National Standard, while the unprecedented challenges include teacher resources, interdisciplinary cooperation, credit allocation for different types of courses and graduates’ quality in the process of developing feature courses to form certain specialty. Polytechnic colleges will have to seize the opportunities by directly facing the challenges and cracking the problems.

Introduction
Increasingly enlarging enrollment of universities and colleges, along with more English departments being newly set up, leads to excessive saturation of English majors in the job market. Statistically, among all the 1145 universities and colleges, 994 of them (which amounts to 86.8% of the total) have set up English majors[1] 458. According to MYCOS, English major has been marked as “red card” major in 2012 and 2013 successively.

Here is a clear signal: the best time for English major, when it had the "great leap forward" and "extraordinary development" [2], has to struggle for survival. Executive personnel of English major have to find out their “comparative advantages”. As a result, many colleges, especially polytechnic colleges, are trying to work out “unique” English major. The uniqueness lies in the fact that their English major is not “pure” but blended with some other majors which reflects the characteristics of their colleges. This new pattern of "English + another major" is quite popular, including "English + law or journalism"[3], "English + economics", “English + humanities” [4]. However, it is quite controversial. Lan Ren-zhe holds such a blending pattern is unacceptable neither in theory or in practice[5]. Regardless of the outcome of debate, the National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate English Majors (hereinafter referred to as the "National Standard") fully affirms the effort made in search of specialty of English major, which provides the theoretical and institutional guarantee for colleges to develop their uniqueness in English major.

Opportunities Brought by the National Standard for the Development of English Majors in Polytechnic Colleges

The opportunities brought by the "National Standard" for the development of polytechnic colleges are embodied in the respect and protection of the specialty. In the curriculum, the "national standard" concept consists of "module teaching, hierarchical optimization, and characteristics preservation", which reflects the trend of diversity, flexibility and autonomy of English major.
development[6]. This is a great opportunity for the English major.

"Module teaching" concept divides English curriculum system into five modules, namely, "general courses" and "core major courses", "add-in major courses", "course practice" and "graduation thesis (design)"[7]. The add-in major courses (otherwise called "elective courses") can be divided into four sections, respectively, language, literature, culture and feature courses[1] 461. The feature courses can be set according to the characteristics of their schools and their faculty. This provides great room for colleges with certain characteristics. For example, if a college excels in Foreign Trade, then the English department/college can develop Business English as their English Major; if a college is particularly good at automotive engineering, then Automotive English, to name just a few.

However, the term “add-in major courses” is still worth discussing. According to the "freedom and openness" of the National Standard, the add-in major courses should not be confined within a certain major, but interdisciplinary in nature. Such nature makes learners more versatile, which meets the requirement of the National Standard. Therefore, it is advisable to change the name into “add-in courses”, rather than “add-in major courses”. Under such concept, the add-in courses for English major can be tourism[8], medical science[9], civil engineering[10], sports[11], etc.

"Hierarchical optimization" is learner-oriented, paying due attention to a students' differences and preferences. Students majoring in English in polytechnic colleges are different from those in liberal arts college: their English is relatively poor, and many of them are not so gifted in learning English. However, some of these students may be interested in mechanical engineering or automotive engineering or material science. If such preference can be respected and protected, it is in accordance with the National Standard’s concept of characteristic development and learner-orientation. The idea of hierarchical optimization acknowledges the differences and complexities among universities and colleges, and respects the differences and characteristics of learners. This is undoubtedly an opportunity for English Major in polytechnic colleges whose survival depends on differences and specialty.

"Characteristics preservation" attaches even more significance for English departments/colleges to develop uniqueness and specialty in English Major. This means seeking uniqueness is not optional, but essential, and is of the same importance as other factors in curriculum setting. Under the guidance of this concept, all colleges and universities can create their own unique module, according to their orientation, resources and history, so that their graduates can not only be specialized but also versatile. Fortunately, polytechnic colleges have a natural advantage in breeding their uniqueness. If English major can form a unique module by blending English courses with other engineering courses to meet the market demand, then it will be a distinctive English major with its own uniqueness.

**Challenges Posed by the National Standard for the Development of English Majors in Polytechnic Colleges**

Compared with English Teaching Syllabus, the National Standard gives out more specific and more detailed instruction for developing unique English Major. However, how to blend scientifically and systematically to create an unique English major is full of challenges, which is demonstrated in the following four aspects:

The first challenge lies in teacher resources. The existing teaching staff is not yet ready to meet the National Standard requirements in establishing an unique English major. To begin with, the National Standard states clearly that English major is a branch of humanities, so teachers are expected to raise students’ humanistic quality and improve their ability of cross-cultural communication. The question is: are teachers themselves qualified in these respects? Due to the enlargement of enrollment in the past two decades, it is not pessimistic to say that the quality of education is declining. On the other hand, the so-called experienced teachers are too busy with
paper writing or project application, or making extra money to have time for self-improvement. Still worse, unlike in liberal arts universities, English teachers in polytechnic colleges have fewer opportunities to study abroad. Therefore, it may be no exaggeration to say that many English teachers may encounter "culture shock" and "cultural aphasia" when abroad. With such teacher resources, it does not stand much hope to cultivate students with "good language proficiency, humanistic knowledge, international perspective, and spirit of innovation" [13]. Secondly, the construction of a unique English major cannot do without “special” teachers—English teachers who also specialize in another major. Such teachers are hard to be found. Introduction of “double-professionally titled teachers” is not likely to succeed either, because that awaits programs that promote deep cooperation between universities and corporations, and that needs government coordination and policy support. That’s not going to happen in a short term.

The second challenge lies in the interdisciplinary cooperation. As mentioned earlier, a unique English Major entails blending of English courses with other engineering courses. However, the reality is that in the absence of the favorable policies from the school, engineering majors are reluctant to cooperate. The reason is very simple: from the aspect of management, it involves such problems as financial allocation per student, ownership of students’ honor, etc. On the part of teachers, engineering teachers are not willing to take more courses for English Major students, especially when their workload saturates. Moreover, giving lessons to English majors means the teacher would have to adjust teaching contents and difficulty level for them. Not many teachers will make such sacrifice for nothing. In addition, “course practice”, one of the five modules the "national standard" proposes, cannot be implemented without using facilities from other engineering department. Lack of interdisciplinary cooperation poses a challenge for accomplishing a unique English Major.

The third challenge is credit allocation. Jiang Hongxin [1] (460-461) believes that an appropriate total amount of credits should be about 155-170, totaling 2500-2700 class hours. Based on the five modules set up in the national standard, credits for each module are roughly as follows: general courses account for about 25% - 30% of total credit, core major courses take up 30-40%, add-in major courses account for 20% - 25%, and course practice, 15%. Unfortunately, Jiang missed graduation thesis (design). The add-in courses contain four sections. Suppose the credits for this module is averaged out, then the feature courses, one of the four sections, may only take up about 6% of the total credits, i.e. 10.2 credits. Suppose the 1 credit equals to 16 class hours, then feature courses have a maximum of 160 class hours, which is roughly about 4 feature courses. Can these limited feature courses help in the course of setting up a unique English Major? Not likely. Under the framework of total credits, increasing the credits for one module means decreasing the credits from other module(s). How to find the best balance point is one of the major challenges faced by the executives of English Major.

The last challenge concerns the quality and popularity of graduates in the job market. The graduates’ competitiveness in the job market and the adaptability on the job reflects, to a large extent, how successful their major is, and the success of a major is closely related to courses that have been set up in the curriculum. If the courses are what the market needs, then the graduates will be well-received in the job market. It is under this logic that market-oriented features courses are introduced. The problem is, as is stated earlier, the feature courses and the regular courses are in a as-one-rises-the-other-falls relationship. In the current system, however, many of the regular courses are fixed and cannot be deleted, which means there is not much room for feature courses. Such a unique English Major, in the worst situation, may produce graduates who are neither proficient in English nor well-acquainted with expertise from feature courses. Obviously, setting up a unique English Major is a double-edged sword, and requires careful planning to ensure the quality of students.
Conclusion

The National Standard is a programmatic document that encourages English major to seek for educational specialty. To many polytechnic colleges, it is an opportunity for development. Meanwhile, it also brings challenges to many aspects of English education. In order to grasp the opportunity, the executive personnel of English department/college would have to take into account market needs and possible combination with leading majors of their schools to plan for a unique English Major. It is also advisable for executives from different polytechnic colleges to communicate with and learn from each other. For example, Wuhan University of Engineering is playing a leading role in developing unique English Majors because the president of the university and the department of academic affairs see the importance of it, and facilitate the interdisciplinary cooperation.

The National Standard is also a tool for evaluation, against which many English Majors in universities and colleges will be judged, and eventually warning will be given to a list of English Majors from certain universities and colleges which are not so qualified[14]. This may sound frustrating, but it can also be seen as an opportunity where English departments/colleges can ask for and probably will get more support from school since on one wants to see the English Major to be canceled. Executive personnel of the English major from many universities and colleges will have to grasp the opportunity before it is too late.

References


