

A Survey of Employers' Feedback on English Majors from Private Colleges

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ABSTRACT

In the context of increasingly fierce competition in the job market, it is difficult for English majors, especially those from private colleges to obtain jobs after graduation. This paper, based on the theory of need analysis, surveys employers' feedback on English majors from private colleges, to reveal problems in talent training, clarifying the target needs in future working environments, and exploring the training model of English majors in private colleges. The survey adopts the qualitative research of phenomenological study. On the basis of the analysis of the common themes identified, most employers express their dissatisfaction with both graduates' ability and their attitude towards work. Recommendations in terms of training target, curriculum setting, internship, and assessment are proposed accordingly.

Keywords: *Employers, English majors, private colleges, social needs*

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the employment of college graduates is alarmingly severe. The number of college graduates will reach 8.74 million in 2020. With the continuous expansion of English majors, the number of college graduates increases on an annual basis, hence increasingly fierce competition in job hunting.

According to *Employment Report of Chinese College Graduates* by Mycos[1], a neutral research company, the employment of English graduates is characterized by "high unemployment and low salary", causing widespread concern. English is listed as one of the ten least employed majors. For three years in a row, the surveys reveal that approximately 30 percent of unemployed graduates major in English or law. Due to enrollment expansion, many universities blindly pursue scale and ignore quality, which gives rise to proliferation of majors, and students enrolled far exceed market demand. Inevitably it is difficult for students to obtain jobs after graduation. To fundamentally solve the problem, colleges need to prioritize social demands in terms of talent training and curriculum setting and focus on the needs of local economic development[2]. Based on the theory of need analysis, this survey investigates both subjective and objective needs of the employers of English majors from private colleges in Shanghai, to clarify the target needs for graduates in the future working environment, reflecting on problems in talent training, and exploring the training model of English majors in private colleges.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This survey adopts qualitative research, specifically,

phenomenological study, which aims to investigate the specific recruitment requirements, and ask experienced personnel and business managers to detail their hiring experience when selecting potential employees. Hopefully, some common themes can be identified and feasible recommendations are offered to talent training in private colleges. Research questions of the study go as follows: 1) What specific requirements do employers have when recruiting English majors? What other factors will be taken into consideration? 2) What needs to be improved for newly-recruited employees? 3) What effective ways do employers suggest to boost their abilities?

The sampling strategy for this survey is intentional sampling combined with maximum sampling. All respondents are either human resources managers or business managers responsible for recruitment and training, with rich experience in employment, who can provide suggestions for talent needs from different industries and different perspectives. The researcher interviewed 18 employers from diverse enterprises, including state-owned enterprises, public institutions, private enterprises and foreign-funded enterprises; there were both male and female interviewees, and their work experience ranged from 5 to 18 years.

Data were collected through various methods, such as semi-structured interviews, related documents, observation of recruitment and training, pictures and notes, informal dialogue with directors, and other audio and video materials, thus ensuring triangulation and maximizing objectivity and fairness of the results. The process of data collection lasted for about four months, so the researcher had enough time to conduct multiple in-depth interviews and collect the information required.

3. RESULTS & ANALYSIS

3.1. What Employers Value is Graduates' Ability Instead of Certificates

Requirements on English majors vary from enterprise to enterprise, but two dimensions are universally emphasized based on multiple interviews with HR managers, various recruitment ads and interview documents, namely, professional knowledge including listening, speaking, reading, writing, translation, computer literacy and positive attitude towards work, from responsibility to communication, from quick learning to problem solving, from teamwork to hard work.

The international business manager of one private company said, "Ability always comes first. Of course, a good educational background does matter. But our hiring decision depends on candidates' performance during the interview." "Tem-4 and Tem-8 certificates are only the stepping stone to the interview," a recruitment executive concluded. "It is the application of English and comprehensive quality candidates demonstrate during the interview that we value." In a word, although certificates are a passport to the interview and an important indicator for first-round selection, ultimately it is up to graduates' quality displayed in the interview.

The interview involves a variety of phases, mainly to examine whether candidates are eligible for the job, whether their motivation is justified and whether their resume is reliable. "The interview mainly focuses on candidates' comprehensive quality. Abilities such as articulation, communication and problem-solving cannot speak for themselves in the resume." explained by an HR manager from a state-owned enterprise.

In order to provide triangulated data, the author observed two interviews of English graduates in a foreign-funded company and a private enterprise respectively. Firstly, applicants were required to introduce themselves in English to demonstrate their English pronunciation and fluency. Then, they were asked about their previous internship and to give examples to illustrate their role and gains from it, in order to display their logic and presentation skills. After that, the interviewer presented the candidates with several situational questions in the job to evaluate candidates' flexibility and matching degree with the position.

Most applicants do well in English self-introduction for this part is fully prepared before the interview; their speech is fluent and smooth without any pause. However, when it comes to internship experience and the role they play in it, many graduates' statements are often inconsistent and logically flawed. A case in point is a graduate who applied for the position of supervisor in an English training center. When asked to give an example to prove his leadership, he hesitated and mumbled something irrelevant, meandering, and virtually content free. Another example is a graduate who applied for HR specialist. When asked what skills are the most important, she replied that communication was of

vital importance. However, the interviewer then presented a simulated work scenario, such as how to solve the conflict in the meeting room, to the interviewer's disappointment, the candidate offered a reckless solution without any mention of communication, which just contradicted her previous answer and greatly impaired her credibility.

3.2. Limited Scope of Knowledge and Poor Learning Ability Lead to Graduates' Failure to Qualify for the Job

A problem generally complained by employers about English majors is that their knowledge structure is rather restricted, and few of them are quick learners. It is a big challenge to get started at work. "In college, the theoretical knowledge from textbooks is perfectly within their reach and they do quite well in exams. But it is a totally different story at the workplace, where their blind spots in knowledge are exposed. In fact, what college students need is lifelong learning, just as the saying goes: live and learn. To some extent, learning in the real sense does not start until the moment graduates step into society." Reflected by an HR manager in a translation company. "Actually English is just a tool. What's more important is looking beyond the window of language and perceiving Western culture, value and ideology. It is more about the culture." According to *Mycos Report on Graduates' Employment*, only 55% of English majors obtain jobs that match their major, which means a considerable number of English graduates do not work in industries directly related to English, where they are just beginners and have to learn from scratch. For them, the learning process has just begun, and they are learning by doing, hence the importance of learning ability.

It is a common practice that companies launch professional training for new employees, among whom those quick learners will gain the competitive edge. A recruitment manager commented, "It is advisable that students are informed of up-to-dates of various fields and maintain their curiosity towards new and novel things. Willingness to learn and open-mindedness really count in their future job." As long as they are motivated to learn, embrace new things and keep upgrading their knowledge system, they will eventually achieve career success despite the fact that their major does not match the current job, which is echoed by the saying success knows no origin."

3.3. Graduates Lack of Career Plan and Self-discipline

Another problem frequently mentioned by employers is fresh graduates' lack of career plans. Some graduates do not have clear goals in job-hunting or career development. They blindly follow others in sending resumes regardless of their strength and potential. A manager couldn't agree more. "Some graduates do not have the slightest idea of

what they are good at. When inquired about their motivation, they do not speak of their competence or qualification for the position at all. Instead, their answers vary from company's reputation to handsome salary." Another respondent shared the same opinion. "Some graduates begin the interview with the blunt question of how much the salary is, which is really inappropriate, for they have not demonstrated their potential yet." Actually, many enterprises favor those who can work in a down-to-earth manner; it is their attitude towards work that determines whether they are hired. "Without a proper mentality, graduates may fail to adapt to their new role in transition from student to employee. In college, students are comparatively relaxed and professor-student relationship is equal. In contrast, the hierarchy in company is rather strict and the seemingly trivial stuff may well be related to actual interests of the company. Some fresh graduates are criticized by superiors for their poor performance at work, feeling so frustrated that they just walked away and resigned." University campus is like the ivory tower, which is free from harsh realities. Once they step into society, the changing role and new identity will create a huge gap and failure to adapt will invite various setbacks.

Emphasis on candidates' work ethic is also mirrored in recruitment advertisements. Through a careful comparison of several recruitment websites which are frequently visited by employers, such as 51job, Zhaopin and LinkedIn, it is found that the following requirements are of high frequency in many advertisements for English majors: sense of responsibility, dedication to work, teamwork, etc. Therefore, it seems that employers have reached a consensus on criteria for ideal employees: dedicated and responsible, down-to-earth, not blindly ambitious, hard-working and willing to cooperate.

4. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above analysis of results, the author believes that talent training in private colleges can be improved from the following aspects, namely, training target, curriculum setting, internship, and assessment, so as to equip graduates with adaptation to society and qualities for future jobs.

4.1. Distinctive Training Targets

First of all, private colleges should seek their own characteristics and highlight their distinctiveness, thus gaining an edge in increasingly fierce competition for student resource. The characteristics of application-oriented graduate training are mainly reflected in the following three aspects: from the perspective of knowledge structure, graduates should be industry-oriented and their knowledge structure features timeliness, applicability and complexity; as to ability, graduates should be equipped with both scientific theories and

methodologies to synthesize, analyze and solve problems; when it comes to quality, application-oriented undergraduates should possess strong social skills, such as public speech, teamwork, coordination and communicative ability[3]. To this end, colleges should construct more training bases, upgrade the teaching facilities, combine the first with the second classroom, and carry out practical teaching throughout the entire college.

4.2. Demand-Oriented Curricula

In terms of curriculum setting and content selection, it is necessary to enrich the courses of the English major, adjust the course focus, adapt to social needs, and increase the proportion of business-related knowledge and up-to-date content. Topic-based teaching enables foreign language teaching to effectively carry out language training and integrate professional content[4] and realizes the organic combination of language teaching and business learning. Private colleges can also offer elective courses in different directions, refine the division of business courses, strengthen professional training, hence graduates' ability to meet social needs. In addition to traditional courses like cross-cultural communication and foreign trade correspondence, it is recommended that courses such as document verification, e-commerce, business negotiation, business communication and office software operation be added to enhance students' practical ability.

4.3. Intensifying Focus on Internship

For private colleges, internship plays a significant role in improving graduates' competitiveness in the fierce job market, hence their increasing focus on practice and internship[5]. Colleges should carry out practical teaching step by step and emphasis can vary from semester to semester. To be specific, business students can start business internships in the 3rd and 4th semesters, which includes visiting enterprises and training by personnel of the enterprise; on-campus training can be launched during the 5th and 6th semesters, when simulation trade and negotiation can be conducted via training software in laboratory; in the 7th and 8th semesters, off-campus internship can be initiated and participation in real business activities such as trade fairs and exhibition should be encouraged on the basis of previous simulation training. Education students can access basic knowledge of educational psychology and pedagogy from 3rd and 4th semesters, and serve as teaching assistants in training center, or observe classes in local kindergarten or elementary schools to acquire valuable experiences. In addition, it is recommended that private colleges cooperate with local government and enterprises, develop internship bases, and establish long-term and stable cooperative relations with employers, so as to gain students more opportunities to participate in actual business or teaching activities while studying in college, which will foster

students' sense of social responsibility, unbiased perception of their drawbacks, and clear goal for career development, thus improving their competitiveness in future job hunting[6].

4.4. Scientific & Comprehensive Assessment

For private colleges, it is an urgent task to align the knowledge students learn with what is assessed, and to evaluate English majors' level more scientifically and comprehensively. Under the market-oriented principles, it is advisable that private colleges no longer adopt TEM-4 and TEM-8 as the only standard for measuring students' level and encourage students to obtain various qualifications or certificates. More importantly, it is necessary to take formative assessment instead of summative assessment, breaking the mechanism that uses test paper to examine students' learning effect. Even in the final exam, business knowledge and skills should be incorporated in addition to professional knowledge. For example, case study and demo class enable students to apply what they learn to solve actual problems at work. Design of marketing plan, field research, or drafting English reports are also good alternatives for students' final assessment.

5. CONCLUSION

Private colleges aim to cultivate graduates who are proficient in both English and business knowledge, and equipped with practical skills to meet social needs. However, private colleges are newly-built colleges without available lessons to learn from. The road is destined to encounter many problems, but the process of solving these problems is exactly the process of continuous improvement of the talents training model. In conclusion,

private colleges will develop its own characteristics and cultivate English talents who can adapt to economic development and satisfy social needs, as long as the market-oriented principles are upheld, talent training goals clarified, curriculum setting optimized, educational resources synthesized, assessment system reformed, and teachers' team improved.

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