

Reflections on the Talent Development Program of “Foreign Language Plus”: Why? What? How? How Good?

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The program of “Foreign Language Plus” aims to offer some non-foreign-language courses, which guide us to the knowledge system about other disciplines, to foreign language students to widen their horizon and enhance their competitiveness. The study first reviews the previous studies on the “Foreign-Language-Plus” Talent Development Program of foreign language majors. Then based on the results of a survey conducted among 235 teachers and 352 students of foreign language majors in China’s universities, it discusses these questions: Why is “plus”? What is “plus”? How can “plus” be achieved? How can the effect of “plus” be evaluated? Then, it demonstrates the main topics that related research and practical work need to focus on in the future: choice of integrated disciplines, setting of integrated curriculum, teachers’ professional training, students’ quality, evaluation of efficiency, utilization of teaching resources, and exploration of high-tech-aided instruction. Finally, it is proposed that the “Foreign Language Plus” program is one of the workable solutions to the problems foreign language majors are confronted with.

Keywords: Foreign-Language-Plus, teaching of foreign languages, teaching reform, talent development

Why Do We Initiate the “Foreign Language Plus”: Research Background

Foreign language ability is a skill of cross-language and cross-cultural communication; foreign language studies are humanistic and social disciplines with a rich history and profound cultural connotation. With the rapid progress of science and technology, and the change and reorganization of social division of labor, foreign language students are facing a challenge in meeting the needs of social development and individual promotion.

Such a challenge is becoming intenser. As foreign language teaching and international communication develop, an increasing number of professionals, who are trained in non-foreign-language disciplines, can use foreign languages fluently and professionally for international communication. Then a tough issue needs to be answered urgently: Graduates of foreign language majors will be facing the risk of unemployment. The discipline of foreign language learning and studies should respond to the doubt about its roles as an independent discipline in the system of university education. Even in foreign language circle, the voices of skepticism and criticism are heard, such as “Is English a profession that should be sorry for its conscience?”,

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“The English discipline is not lightly ill”. The crisis and the way out are discussed (e.g., Guo, 2019; X. L. Li & J. B. Li, 2018; Cai, 2018a; 2018b; Qu & Chen, 2018; Ren, 2018; Wang, 2018; Zha, 2018). Where is the road to foreign language majors? The discussion on “Foreign Language Plus” is a reflection from the perspective of solutions.

What Is “Foreign Language Plus”: Definition of the Concept

What is “Foreign Language Plus”? According to Wang (2011, pp. 30-31), “Foreign Language Plus” is a talent cultivation model breaking through the constraints of single expertise and promoting the integration of knowledge through the integration of high-quality teaching resources, which is in line with the concept of quality education and liberal education. It has changed the unfavorable situation that foreign language majors overemphasize the instrumental nature of foreign languages and neglect the humanities by integrating language learning with other professional knowledge scientifically, broadening students’ knowledge system, and significantly enhancing their ability to think, judge, and practice. Lin and Wang (2019) propose that the talent cultivation model of “Foreign Language Plus” should cultivate “key competencies”, which mainly refer to the abilities of language, learning, critical thinking, cultural communication, innovation, and cooperation.

How Can We Execute the “Foreign Language Plus”: A Review of Literature

In this study, a search was conducted in CNKI with the keyword “foreign language+” in the title, and a total of 44 documents were published from 1994 to 2019, after duplicate queries or non-academic reports, etc., were removed. First, these studies were classified by subject, as shown in Table 1. Then these studies are reviewed separately below according to the themes they’re devoted to.

Table 1

Classification of the Consulted Literature According to the Content of the Study

| Thesis topic | Number of papers | Percentage of |
|--|------------------|---------------|
| Studies on the theory and practice of talent training model | 19 | 43.18% |
| Studies on the national and regional needs for development | 7 | 15.91% |
| Studies on the teaching of language sub-skills (i.e., teaching of translation) | 2 | 4.55% |
| Studies on teaching quality evaluation and teachers’ capacity development | 2 | 4.55% |
| Studies on the design and development of teaching materials | 2 | 4.55% |
| Studies on foreign language teaching in higher education institutions | 3 | 6.82% |
| Study on the use of internet | 1 | 2.27% |
| Total | 44 | 100% |

Studies on the Cultivation of Talents in Specific Institutions

Most of these studies focus on the reform of the overall teaching concept, and only a few of them provide specific advice on the implementation of the “Foreign Language Plus” model (e.g., Wang, 2011). Wang (2011) takes the five-year double-degree classes of “English + Law” and “English + International Politics” offered by Shandong University as an example and discusses the “Foreign Language + X” dual-degree talent cultivation model. She discussed the orientation, management, innovation, and evaluation of the “Foreign Language Plus” model, emphasizing language ability as the foundation, professional knowledge as the core, practical ability as the focus, the ability of critical thinking and innovation as the trend, and the teaching principle of “laying a good foundation, highlighting the mainstay, focusing on practice, and optimizing comprehensively” as the guidelines.

In addition, there are also other studies exploring the “Foreign Language Plus” model from the aspects of curriculum planning, teaching practice, and faculty development, such as Gao, Gu, and Liu (2019) taking the integration of Russian language major and second major (mining, machinery, economic management) in Heilongjiang University of Science and Technology as an example, Guan et al. (2018) investigating the teaching reform of Japanese language major, and Wei and Shang (2018) reporting the practice of complementing foreign language majors with hotel management major.

Studies on the National and Regional Needs for Development

From the perspective of national development, some studies, such as Bo (2018), Liu (2017), and Yin (2017), discuss the motivation for the “Foreign Language Plus” model in cultivating future talents. Some studies (e.g., Fu, 2019; Cui & Zhang, 2018; Wang, 2017; Zhang, 2018; Zhang & Liu, 2018) look at the issue from the perspective of economic and trade development and cultural exchange in particular regions, for example, Zhang (2018, p. 79) proposing the innovative practice of integrating the “Foreign Language Plus” model based on the guiding idea of “local demand + national strategy” in economic and trade cooperation, and Liu (2019, p. 2) suggesting that the “foreign language only” should be replaced with a brand-new foreign language teaching model, which fits in with regional characteristics.

Studies on the Teaching of Language Sub-skills (I.e., Teaching of Translation)

The discussion of this theme primarily relates to the teaching of translation. In response to the phenomenon that there are many employed translators and few professional translators, as described in “big talents” (men of great talents) are hard to find and small talents (men of mediocre talents) are crowded”, Gu (2018, p. 37) discusses the model of “translator’s ability = Chinese and foreign language skills + professional knowledge + IT technology”, which can nurture composite professional and technical traits in translators.

Studies on the Evaluation of Teaching Quality and the Development of Teachers

From the perspectives of teaching resources, teaching tools, and quality assurance, Sun (2015) compares the changes in teachers’ quality evaluation and students’ performance before and after the introduction of a new evaluation model, based on the case study of a university. Sun and Zhang (2015, p. 241) claims that the ways to improve the teacher workforce should include: renewing the concept of language teaching, strengthening self-competence improvement, improving teaching quality evaluation and management mechanism, and broadening teacher training channels to achieve the improvement in diversified abilities.

Studies on the Design and Development of Teaching Materials

Liu, Liang, and Ma (2013) recommend that the teaching materials should reflect the characteristics of “three-dimensionality”, that is, teaching materials should integrate books, tapes, CD-ROMs, multimedia courseware, and network resources, with text, sound, and images combined in an organic way and cooperate well with classroom teaching in multiple angles and forms.

Studies on the Use of Internet

Zhang (2018) examines the application of an integrated online learning community featuring “foreign language+” and “+foreign language”.

How Well Can the “Foreign Language Plus” Program Work: Reflections and Discussion

The following is a discussion of the questions that need to be answered in the current research and practice

of “Foreign Language Plus”, in relation to the results of a survey of 235 foreign language teachers and 352 foreign language students.

“Why ‘+’?”

In response to the question “Why ‘+’?”, the existing research is mostly confined to the discussion on the reason for the initiation of “Foreign Language Plus” theoretically, lacking the proper attention to empirical research on the need for such a reform. Without clarifying the fundamental issue, it is difficult to achieve sustainable development.

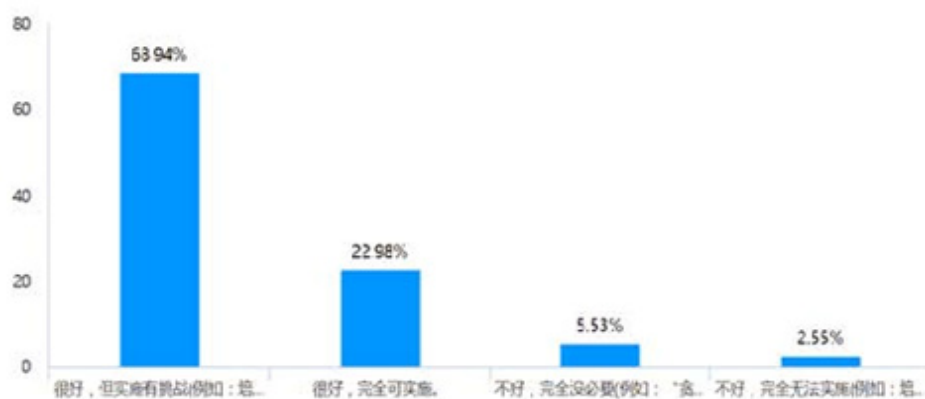
On the other hand, is “Foreign Language Plus” a false proposition? If foreign language is treated as a skill, there is no need for any discussion on “Foreign Language Plus” at all. It is because language skills can be attached to other majors and then perform the instrumental function of communicating the content of these disciplines. If there are deviations in the reorientation of foreign language majors in cooperation with other majors, “foreign language+” may well become “+foreign language”. It will be as Qu and Chen (2018) say that “foreign language+” is a negative concept that is not conducive to the development of undergraduate majors in foreign languages.

Should we not promote “foreign language+” in order to ensure professional independence of the foreign language discipline? The answer is definitely negative. It is a common phenomenon among foreign language majors that only a small number of foreign language majors will develop into research professionals inheriting and passing on the tradition of the discipline, while the majority of foreign language students will not undertake jobs directly related to language and culture after graduation. Then, for the majority of students, it becomes necessary to acquire other professional knowledge and skills through the “Foreign Language Plus” program.

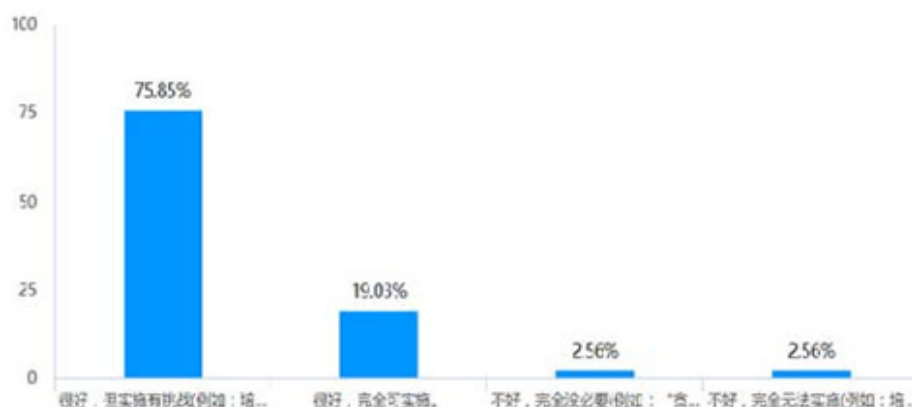
Table 2

Survey on the Implementation of “Foreign Language Plus” Talent Training Program in Universities

| Does your institution implement the “Foreign Language Plus” talent training program? | Foreign language teachers | Foreign language students |
|--|---------------------------|---------------------------|
| (a) Yes | 68.09% (160/235) | 51.42% (181/352) |
| (b) No | 25.11% (59/235) | 16.48% (58/352) |
| (c) Do not know | 6.81% (16/235) | 32.1% (113/352) |



The results from teachers.



The results from students.

Figure 1. Survey on the proposal of implementing the “Foreign Language Plus” program in universities.

Notes. The options for teachers and students, shown from most to least, are (a) very good, but implementation is challenging (e.g., challenges posed by training timelines, teacher resources, student quality etc.); (b) very good, and it is completely implementable; (c) not good, and it is completely unnecessary (e.g., a program with “too much greed”, and it is good enough that foreign language majors can learn foreign languages well); (d) bad, completely unimplementable (e.g., challenges posed by training timelines, teacher resources, student quality etc.).

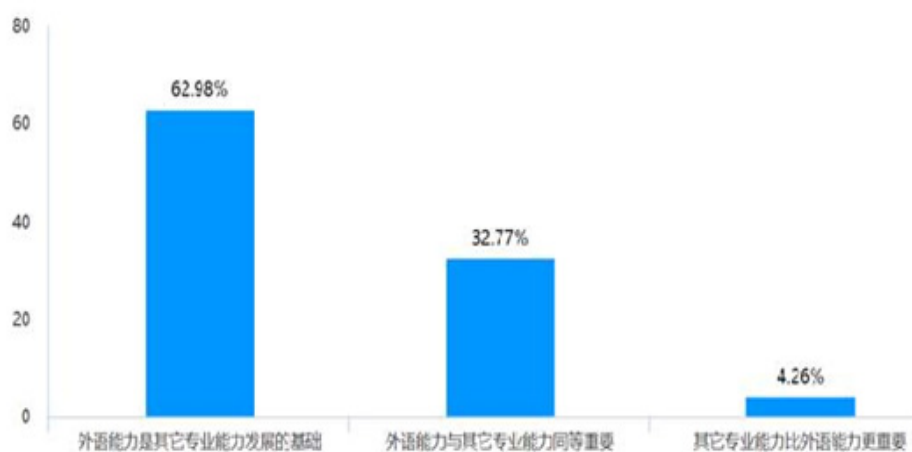
As Table 2 and Figure 1 show, more than half of the institutions, where foreign language majors and students are enrolled, have implemented the “Foreign Language Plus” program; almost all foreign language teachers and students (68.94% of teachers and 75.85% of students) have a positive attitude toward the initiative of “foreign language +”, although not all teachers and students have been well informed of it.

“What Is ‘+’?”

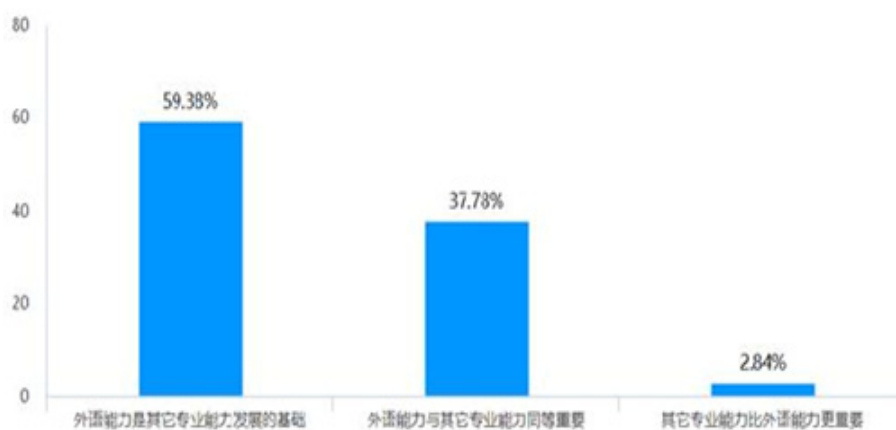
What is the relationship between foreign language majors and the supplemented majors? What is the difference between the “Foreign Language Plus” model and the “major + minor” model? The existing studies are not clear about this. The most detailed explanation can be found in Wang (2011, pp. 30-31), who advances the idea that “the ‘Foreign Language Plus X’ talent training model is not a mechanical combination of two majors, but also differs from the “major + minor” model.

According to Figure 2, while 62.98% of foreign language teachers and 59.38% of foreign language students still agree that foreign language is fundamental and dominant in the “Foreign Language Plus” program, 32.77% of foreign language teachers and 37.78% of foreign language students believe that foreign language skills are as important as supplemented professional skills.

Regarding the role of foreign languages in the “Foreign Language Plus” program, we need to listen to the voices of teachers and students, but at the same time, we need the administrators to make global guidelines based on theoretical and empirical research, and we need experts and scholars to discuss “What is ‘+’?”. Only when this question is clearly answered can we adjust the relative positions of foreign languages and other majors in the framework of foreign language majors. Also only in this way, will “foreign language +” not be improperly altered into “+foreign language”, and will foreign language majors flourish rather than perish.



The results from teachers.



The results from students.

Figure 2. Survey on the importance of developing students' foreign language skills in the "Foreign Language Plus" program.

Notes. The options for teachers and students, from most to least, are (a) foreign language ability is the basis for the development of the abilities in other professional areas; (b) foreign language ability is as important as the abilities in other professional areas; (c) foreign language ability is less important than the abilities in other professional areas.

"How '+'?"

These shortcomings are common to previous studies: lack of specific curriculums, comparative studies before and after the adoption of a new model, lack of sufficient data to support the evaluation of the effects, and lack of detailed discussions on the design and results of the questionnaires. Take two studies as examples: Qu (2012) discusses six modules of the curriculum system (i.e., public basic courses, professional basic courses, professional compulsory courses, professional elective courses, comprehensive quality courses, and practical training courses), but does not provide a specific curriculum plan and comparison of the efficiency before and after the reform. Li, Sun, Li, and Huang (2018) propose the combination of the first classroom and the second classroom, the combination of on-campus practical training and off-campus practice, and international exchange and cooperative schooling to realize the dual enhancement of professional and social practice, but do not give a specific operation plan.

The "How '+'?" question involves reflections on a series of questions, namely: "+" on what basis? "+" what? How to "+"? Who will "+"? Can the "+" be achieved? These questions must be considered in the context

of national needs, social services, regional characteristics, school strengths, faculty development, and student quality.

First of all, regarding the question of on what basis “+” is implemented, as shown in Figures 3 and 4, the most important factors in the implementation of the “Foreign Language Plus” program are, in order of importance, the needs and cooperation of students, the planning and implementation of the school’s teaching administration, and the awareness and efforts of teachers. According to Figures 5 and 6, the most important issues for foreign language majors are: how to “+”, who to “+”, and what to “+”.

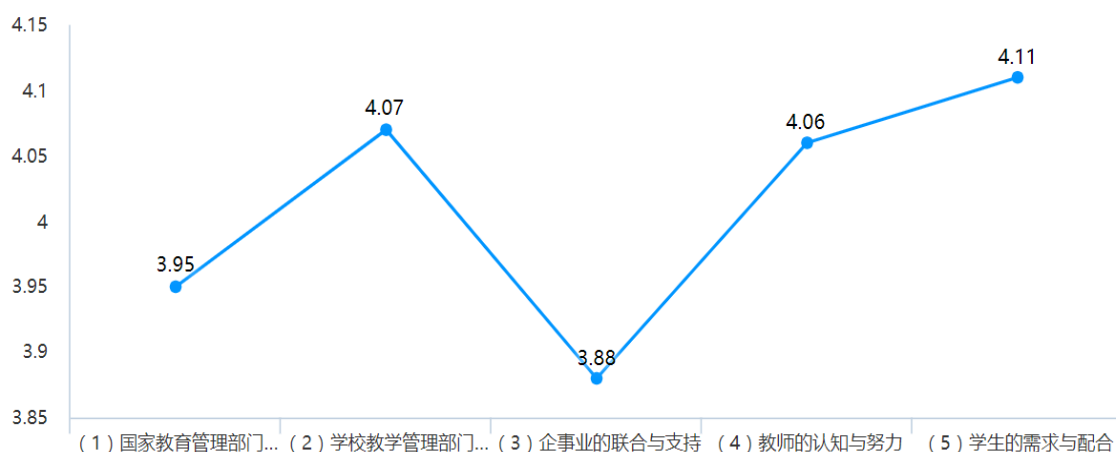


Figure 3. Survey on foreign language teachers' attitudes towards the importance of factors related to the implementation of the “Foreign Language Plus” program.

Notes. The options from right to left are (1) policies and support from the national education administration; (2) planning and execution of school teaching management; (3) the association and support of enterprises and institutions; (4) teachers' awareness and efforts; (5) the needs and cooperation of students. The scoring method of each choice is recorded as 5 to 1 from high to low level, for example, in this table: very important (5 points), very important (4 points), important (3 points), not too important (2 points), not important (1 point). In Figure 4, the note is the same and will not be repeated.

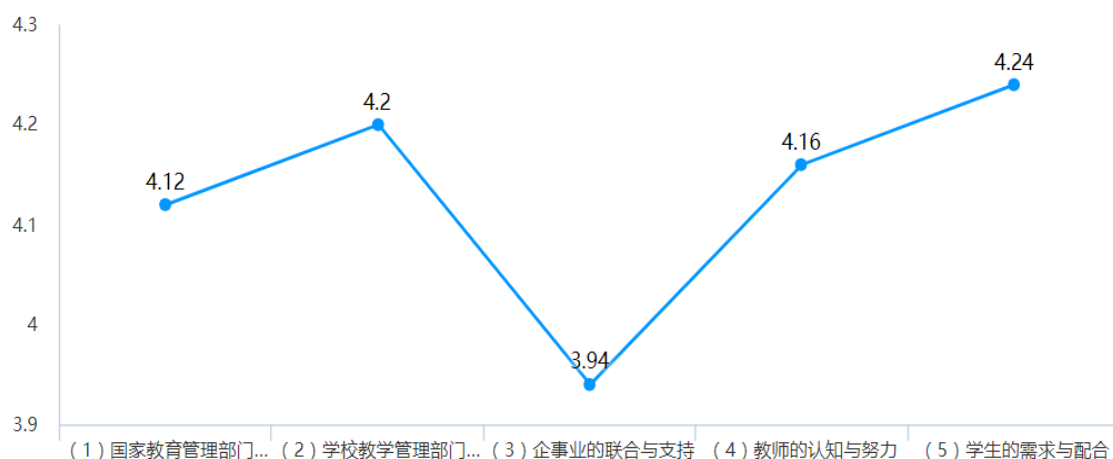


Figure 4. Survey on foreign language students' attitudes towards the importance of factors related to the implementation of the “Foreign Language Plus” program.

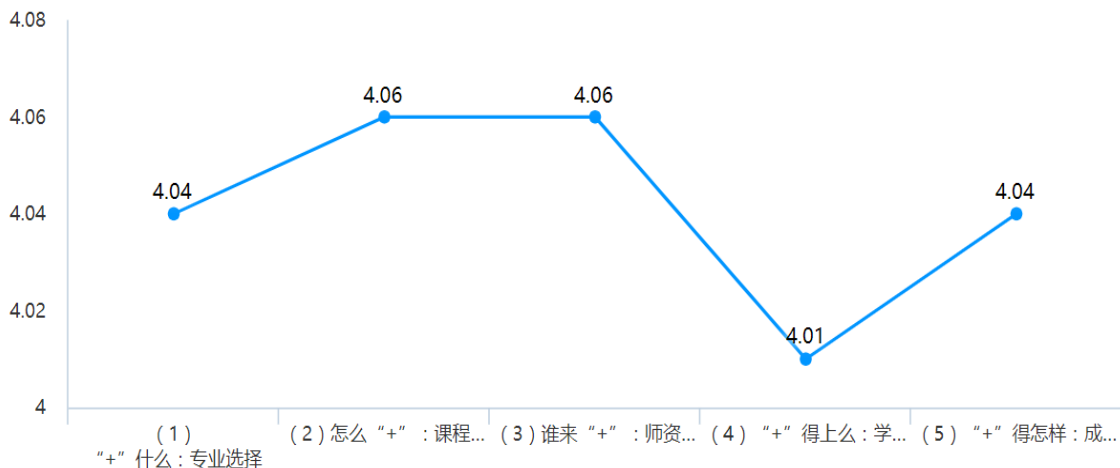


Figure 5 Survey on foreign language teachers' attitudes toward the challenges associated with the implementation of the "Foreign Language Plus" program.

Notes. The options from right to left are (1) what to "+": choice of major; (2) how to "+": design of curriculum; (3) who to "+": faculty development; (4) "+" on what: quality of students; (5) how good is the "+": evaluation of efficiency. In Figure 6, the note is the same and will not be repeated.

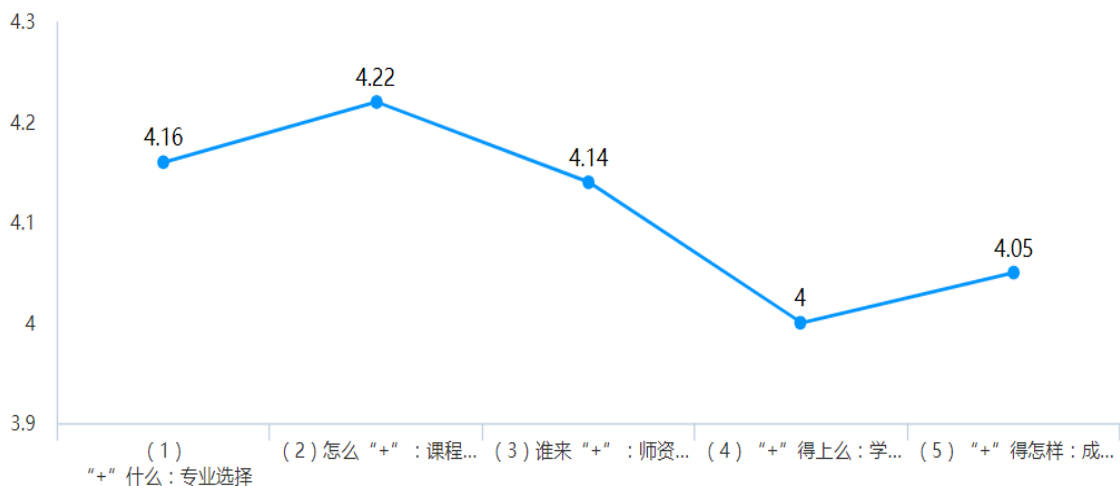


Figure 6. Survey on foreign language students' attitudes toward challenges related to the implementation of the "Foreign Language Plus" program.

Secondly, when it comes to the question of what to "+", according to Figures 7 and 8, teachers and students of foreign language majors all believe that the future potential of the major should be considered. In addition, teachers also attach importance to regional needs, while students also rank their own interest in learning high.

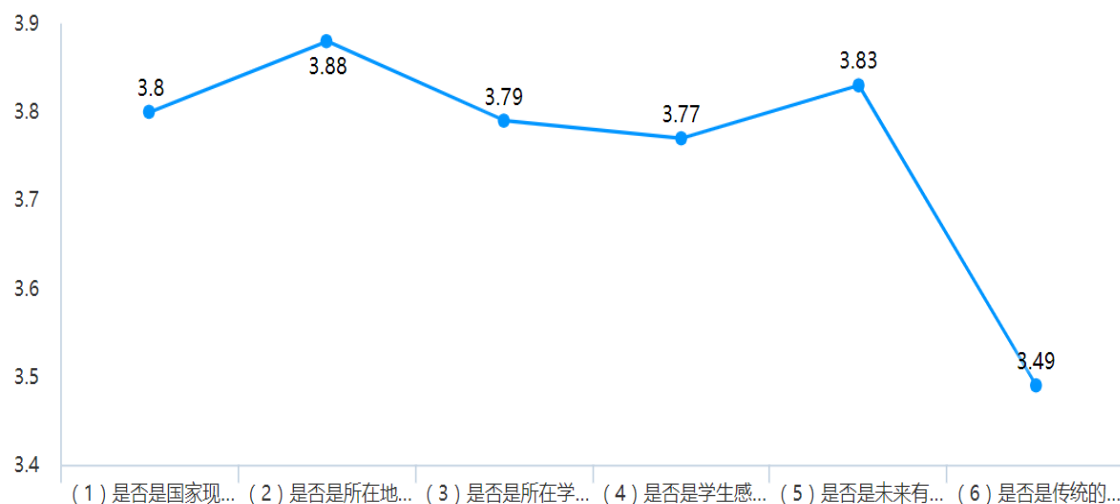


Figure 7. Survey on foreign language teachers' attitudes towards the challenges associated with the implementation of the "Foreign Language Plus" program.

Notes. The options from right to left are: (1) whether it is a major that is urgently needed by the country now; (2) whether it is a major that is urgently needed by the region now; (3) whether it is a major that is the strength of the university; (4) whether it is a major that students are interested in; (5) whether it is a major that has potential in the future; (6) whether it is a traditionally popular major. In Figure 8, the note is the same and will not be repeated.

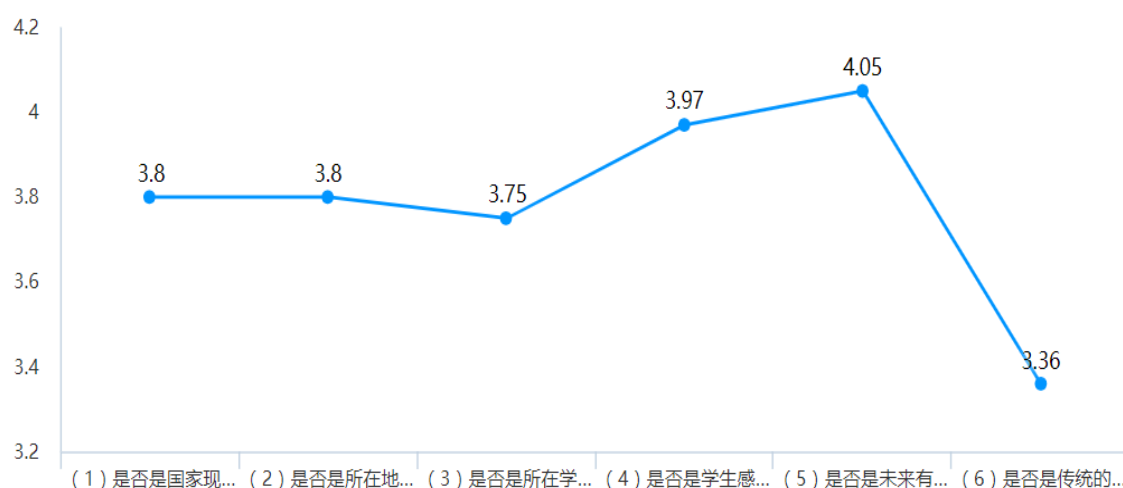


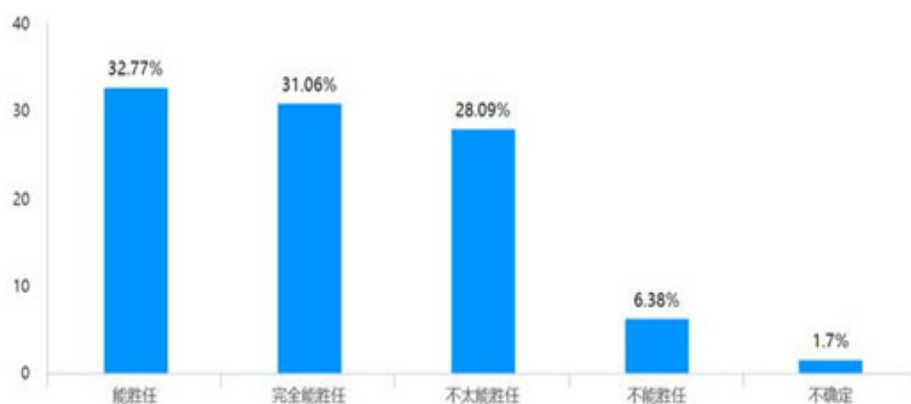
Figure 8. Survey on foreign language students' attitudes toward challenges related to the implementation of the "Foreign Language Plus" program.

“Who Will ‘+’?”

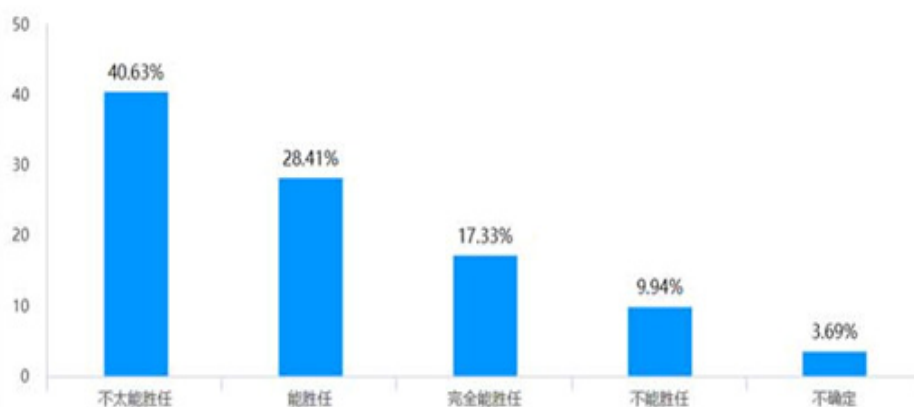
Faculty development is the cornerstone of achieving “Foreign Language Plus”, and existing research is far from sufficient to address this issue, as shown in Table 1. This issue can be zoomed in on by investigating three questions, namely: “Who can +?” “Who is +?” “Who can + well?”.

First, there is the question “Who can +?” (Who do you think are competent to implement the teaching of non-foreign-language courses oriented by the “Foreign Language Plus” model?). Figure 9 shows that 31.06% of foreign language teachers and 17.33% of students think foreign language teachers are fully competent when they evaluate the possibility of foreign language teachers teaching non-foreign-language courses that they are not familiar with, while 32.77% of foreign language teachers and 28.41% of students think foreign language

teachers are competent to do so. For the majority of the teachers and students, they do not optimistically assess the workability.



The results from teachers.



The results from students.

Figure 9. Survey on the possibility of foreign language teachers teaching courses in non-foreign-language courses.

Notes. The results are shown according to the percentages of the options. The options in the results from the teachers are given from left to right in this order: (1) competent; (2) fully competent; (3) not very competent; (4) not competent; (5) uncertain. The options in the results from the students are given from the left to the right in this order: (1) not very competent; (2) competent; (3) fully competent; (4) not competent; (5) uncertain.

Second, here comes the question “Who is +?” (Who is engaging in the teaching of non-foreign-language courses oriented by the “Foreign Language Plus” model?). Figure 10 shows that about 40% of the courses known to the respondents are taught in foreign languages by foreign language teachers with training in both foreign language majors and others, which, to a certain degree, shows the achievement of building a comprehensive and interdisciplinary faculty based on foreign languages. On the other hand, it should be noted that about 30% of the courses are taught in foreign languages by non-foreign-language teachers, those not trained as foreign language majors, and only about 10% of the courses are taught in foreign languages by foreign language teachers with training in foreign languages only, which means that in this part of the curriculum there is no longer a need for the teachers merely having linguistic background. This also means that the number of courses taught by foreign language teachers will be drastically reduced, which means that a large

number of foreign language teachers will have to change their jobs if they cannot accommodate their professional roles according to updating curriculums.

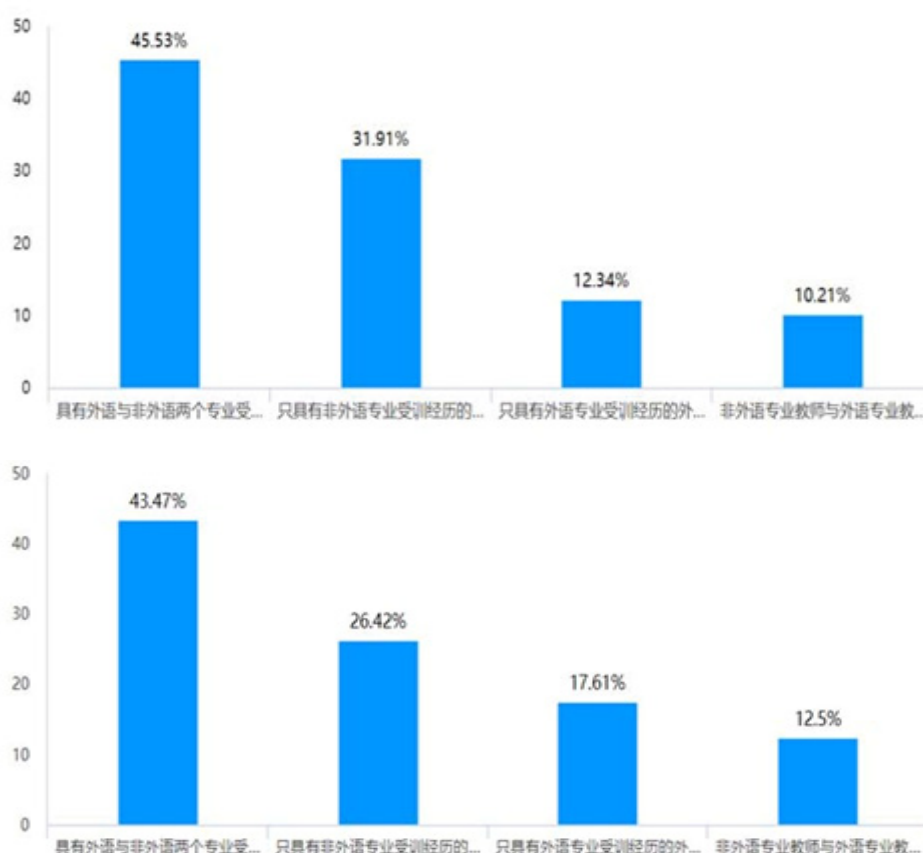


Figure 10. Survey on teachers of non-foreign-language courses in the “Foreign Language Plus” program.

Notes. The options for teachers and students from most to least are: (1) foreign language teachers with training in both foreign languages and other majors teach these non-foreign-language courses in a foreign language; (2) non-foreign-language teachers with training in non-foreign-language fields teach non-foreign-language courses in a foreign language; (3) foreign language teachers with training in foreign languages teach non-foreign-language courses in a foreign language; (4) non-foreign-language teachers teach non-foreign-language courses jointly with foreign language teachers.

Finally, it comes to the evaluation of efficiency, “Who can ‘+’ well?” (How well does the “+” version work?). Figure 11 reflects that when foreign language teachers with only foreign language training experience take on non-foreign-language courses, they generally focus on teaching language details rather than specialized contents, and it is difficult for them to guide students to conduct in-depth learning, thinking, and practice on specialized contents. In other words, such a “+” is only a mechanical accumulation in form, which has difficulty in combining different disciplines organically, as in the way oil and water never blend perfectly even when they are mixed up.

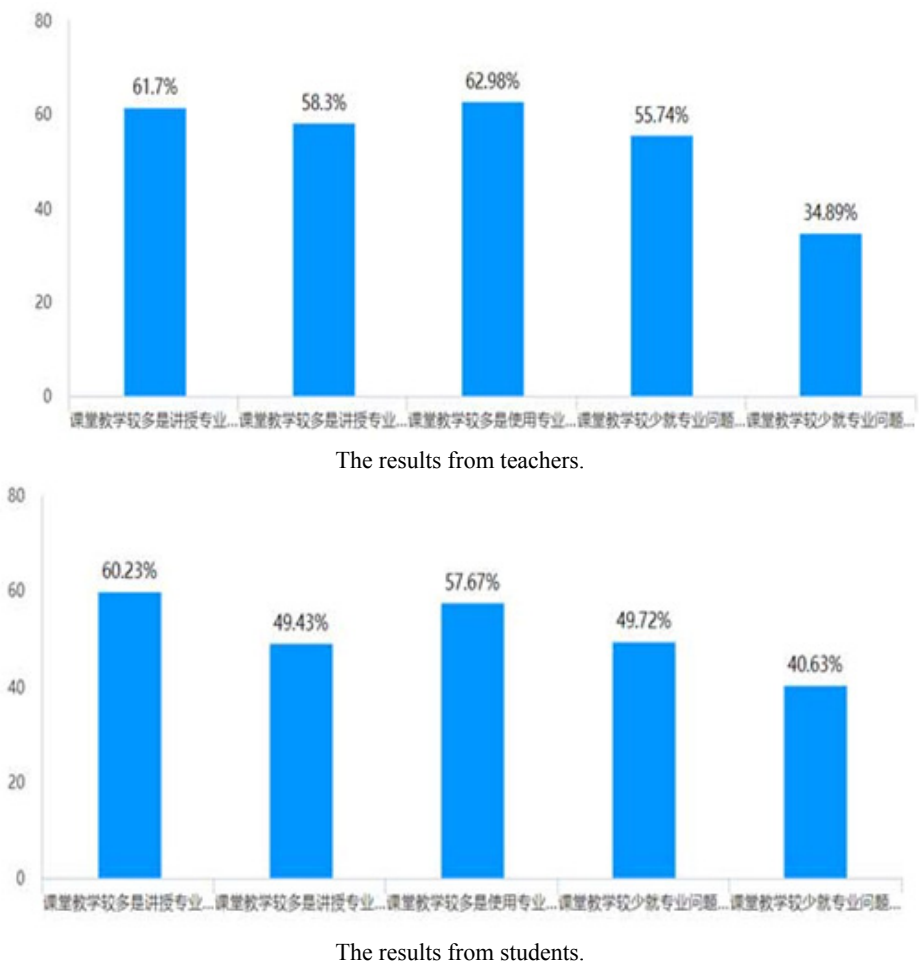


Figure 11. Survey on the teaching situation of non-foreign language courses in the “Foreign Language Plus” program. Notes. The options for teachers and students from left to right are: (1) classroom instruction is more often on foreign language translations of specialized terms; (2) classroom instruction is more often on language skills in specialized literature; (3) classroom instruction is more often on introductory literature on specialized fields; (4) classroom instruction is less often on specialized issues leading to in-depth reading and discussion; (5) classroom instruction is less often on specialized issues enabling students to practice and extend their research.

“How’s the ‘+’?”

There is a serious lack of evaluation studies on “Foreign Language Plus”, as shown in Table 1. Sun (2015) is one of the few studies that focus on efficiency; however, it does not elaborate specific criteria for evaluation. Figures 5 and 6 tell us that although teachers and students pay more attention to the “how well does “+” work?”, the guiding and corrective role of the evaluation system is not fully recognized. A dynamic evaluation system can play an important role in monitoring and improving talent development programs, and this issue needs to be discussed in a more research-based and empirical manner.

Concluding Remarks

First of all, this study reviews the literature related to the “Foreign Language Plus” talent cultivation program (see Table 1), and finds that the research can be expanded mainly in the following areas: The research needs to be improved in detail, the empirical research needs to be strengthened, the teacher team needs to be

built up, the efficiency evaluation research needs to be strengthened, the construction of teaching materials needs to be kept up, and the use of new networks and information technology needs to be deepened.

After that, the study discusses these questions based on the results of a survey of foreign language students and faculty on issues related to “foreign language+”: Why “+”? What is the “+”? How to “+”? Who will do the “+”? “How well does it work?” In particular, the topics that need joint efforts in future research and practice are: professional selection, curriculum development, faculty development, student quality, and efficiency evaluation.

The biggest problem faced by “Foreign Language Plus” is: first of all, the crisis of identity for foreign language majors, as shown in Figure 2, more than one-third of foreign language majors’ teachers and students think that foreign language ability is as important as the abilities in other disciplines, and if we do not focus on highlighting the characteristics of foreign language majors, “foreign language+” will simply reduced to “+foreign language”. This aside, the interdisciplinary ability of foreign language teachers’ team needs to be improved. As Figures 9 and 10 reveal, if a large number of courses of the “Foreign Language Plus” program are taught by non-foreign-language teachers, then a large number of foreign language teachers will face difficulty in saturating their workload, and finally there will be no place for sustenance. Finally, the accumulation of foreign language and other majors, as shown in Figure 11, reflects the pitiful fact that many “Foreign Language Plus” courses are stuck in simple learning of language itself rather than are oriented towards the study of new-brand majors.

Pressure is also motivation; challenge is also opportunity. In today’s international situation, national needs are undergoing profound changes and foreign language majors are facing new problems and simultaneously welcoming new openings. Only by working together, maintaining professional characteristics, attaching importance to language services, and “understanding change, seeking change, and adapting to change” can we stimulate vitality and keep moving forward.

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