

# *Featured Interdisciplinary Training Models of MTI Talents in Colleges and Universities through the Lens of New Liberal Arts*

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**Abstract:** By leveraging their own featured specialties to facilitate the training of Master of Translation and Interpreting (MTI) program, industrial-oriented colleges and universities can seize the golden opportunity brought by the “new liberal arts” initiative to cultivate interdisciplinary language service talents tailored to the market needs. Through a status quo analysis, this study attempts to examine multiple aspects concerning the training models of MTI program in industry colleges and universities, including educational objectives, curriculum setting, faculty allocation, and practical training, in an effort to discover a unique path of training compound MTI professionals. Given the shared challenges faced by such institutions, it is suggested to further create a favorable interdisciplinary learning environment, improve the whole process of talent training, and boost the employability of students in future.

## 1. Introduction

Driven by the reform of China’s professional degree policy, the Master’s Degree in Translation and Interpretation (MTI), which aims at training application-oriented and professional translation and interpretation talents, has been developing rapidly since its inception in 2007. Within 15 years, a total of 316 Chinese colleges and universities have obtained the MTI qualifications, providing a new opportunity for the graduate linguistic education.

Behind this upsurge, however, the degree program development of such higher institutions are sometimes hindered by the shortcomings in training conditions, teaching models and multiple other aspects. Currently, it is hard for them to enhance their education quality as fast as the expansion of program enrollment. Certain ivory-tower teaching content is somehow disconnected from social needs, and the teaching effect is yet to be improved before meeting the diversified market expectations for budding translators and interpreters. Apart from prestigious higher institutions, the talent training programs of some colleges and universities are still largely in the stage of exploring their own features and advantages, displaying more similarities but fewer distinctive characteristics [1], without making full use of their own resources to develop characteristic courses and activities.

Those MTI programs have few essential differences with academic master degree programs, failing to achieve a proper balance between practice-oriented and academic research. In a sense, this runs counter to the market orientation and pragmatic mandate of professional degrees.

The proposed idea concerning “new liberal arts” construction in China helps to weaken the traditional division of disciplines and advocate interdisciplinary talent training. The major of translation and interpretation is a tool-oriented and supportive discipline based on multilingual conversion. Only via combination with different specific industries can it demonstrate its flexible value and vitality. MTI education should teach not only the vocational abilities of providing various language services, but also industry knowledge and applied language conversion skills from a professional perspective through training with specific industrial contexts [2]. At present, compound skills are favored by employers. An increasing number of undergraduates are switching their majors from sciences, engineering, agriculture, medicine and other fields to MTI, and quite a few English majors choose to pursue further study in other fields on their linguistic basis. Approached from MTI education in sea-related colleges and universities, the paper examines the way of running MTI programs that feature interdisciplinary majors, and analyzes the common problems in the current MTI education before putting forward corresponding suggestions.

## 2. Status Quo of Specialty MTI Education in Industry Colleges and Universities

With students’ better language proficiency and the increasingly saturated market for language talents, the employers are less attracted by pure language graduates. As a professional degree with clear career orientation, the MTI curriculum are supposed to be guided by market needs and industrial professionalism [3], and developed in line with the localized industries [4], so as to stand out in the fierce competition of talent training. In this context, many colleges and universities have begun to explore the “translation/interpretation + industry specialty” education model by leveraging their own advantages.

For instance, Xi’an Jiaotong University, characterized by medical translation/interpretation, boasts of a considerable number of tutors with medical background and favors the candidates from medical majors in its admission. The “five major universities of Political Science and Law”, namely China University of Political Science and Law, Southwest University of Political Science and Law, East China University of Political Science and Law, Northwest University of Political Science and Law and Zhongnan University of Economics and Law, all offer legal translation/interpretation in their MTI programs, providing special courses such as translation of contract documents, translation of laws and regulations, and translation of legal terms [5]. Moreover, the directions of science and technology, business, aerospace, petroleum, sports, clothing, ceramics and other industries also display distinct characteristics of corresponding industry colleges and universities, which frequently appear in their list of compulsory or elective courses.

Among the relevant researches on the specialized MTI training models, there are more scholarly attention on foreign studies colleges and universities and institutes of technology, but less focus on other specialized (e.g. agriculture and forestry) institutions. Due to the fuzzy training orientation or the lack of integration with main disciplines, the rapidly growing MTI programs may be marginalized and undervalued in certain non-language colleges and universities. The unsatisfactory training process and results can also dampen the enthusiasm of both faculties and students. Some teachers armed with interdisciplinary awareness are constrained by limited interdisciplinary capacities. In other words, they “want to” but “are not able to” put interdisciplinary teaching into practice. The master’s language programs worldwide generally last for 1-3 years, leaving relevant colleges and universities less flexibility and teaching time to arrange pluralistic basic and elective courses of featured specialties in their curriculum setting. There are slight differences among the

elements of the translation and interpretation course systems in different subdivisions, which place major emphasis on academic theories and skills, and their integration with related disciplines and industry knowledge may be a “scratch on the surface” [6]. As a matter of fact, in order to master interdisciplinary subjects such as law and finance, MTI students have to spend a lot of extra time on studying the basic framework and essence of those subjects. The above scenarios impose a great challenge for both teachers with insufficient interdisciplinary experiences and students burdened by heavy assignments in translation and interpretation.

### **3. Epitomized MTI Education Models from Sea-related Colleges and Universities**

#### **3.1. Sea-related MTI Education**

With a universal presence of foreign language majors and the general improvement of non-linguistic professionals’ foreign language levels, graduates of translation and interpretation are often confronted with a “frictional unemployment dilemma” caused by the mismatch between supply and demand. Talents who know both languages and specialties are more likely to be favored by the job market. The construction of the featured MTI programs conforms to the demand for language talents in specific industries, for it not only links the ivory tower with social and economic development, but also constitutes a logical starting point for the promotion of the MTI discipline [7].

Functioned as an important force among colleges and universities with industrial characteristics, sea-related colleges and universities assume great responsibilities of training marine professionals. A comparative study on the MTI education-running models in sea-related colleges and universities can provide epitomized references for industry institutions to further promote the construction of specialized translation and interpretation disciplines under new liberal arts construction.

At present, the increased international cooperation in the marine field have facilitated the demand for translators and interpreters of sea-related specialties. The language conversion courses on ocean and maritime affairs offered by sea-related institutions include the ocean, shipping, aquatic products, food, water conservancy and multiple other key industrial development areas. A number of universities, represented by Ocean University of China, Dalian Maritime University, Shanghai Maritime University, Hohai University, Dalian Ocean University, Shanghai Ocean University, Jimei University and Shanghai Customs College, have successively obtained the qualification for running MTI programs.

The locations, students, teachers, course requirements, teaching methods and training intensities vary in different MTI colleges and universities. “Teaching according to local conditions and aptitude” is an unsurpassed approach to realize targeted training and promote the application of knowledge. Sea-related colleges and universities are mainly located in coastal areas, close to a number of specialized enterprises and institutions. They have gathered a group of well-known experts and scholars in relevant professional fields (e.g. marine living resources conservation and management, marine environmental protection, maritime transportation, maritime law, and water conservancy engineering construction), undertaking a large number of sea-related projects.

#### **3.2. Interdisciplinary Training Models**

In recent years, modeled on the Instructive Training Program for the Education of Graduate Students of the Professional Degree of Master of Translation and Interpretation, the above colleges and universities target at the applied translation and interpretation abilities by promoting characteristic specialties, trying to explore a novel interdisciplinary training path for “new liberal arts” compound talents, while carrying out detailed adjustments in the aspects of educational objectives, curriculum settings, faculty allocation, and practical training, etc.

### 3.2.1. Educational Objectives

In terms of educational objectives, sea-related colleges and universities have introduced personalized arrangements according to their own comprehensive strength or industry attributes [8]. Institutions such as Ocean University of China and Hohai University have not put special emphasis on the training of marine talents in their teaching syllabi, nor have they set up sea-related MTI directions. In contrast, under the general guidance of “cultivating high-level, application-oriented, vocational (professional) translation/interpretation talents serving the economic, cultural and social construction”, Dalian Maritime University, Shanghai Maritime University, Shanghai Ocean University, and Dalian Ocean University integrate the interdisciplinary narrative. They value the training of language service talents oriented toward international shipping, marine science and technology, marine commerce and cultural translation, and set up courses with sea-related characteristics, leveraging the power of language to better communicate China’s marine stories to the world.

### 3.2.2. Curriculum Setting

In terms of curriculum setting, apart from the professional basic courses similar to other universities, the MTI programs of certain sea-related colleges and universities also offer special elective courses of their advantageous majors, and modules of special frontier/practical courses, invite experts to deliver industry lectures, so as to enhance students’ interdisciplinary interest and quality. Students are empowered with direct access to such types of courses as marine laws translation, marine literature/culture translation, and international shipping translation. Relying on sea-related translation and interpretation textbooks or multimedia materials, teachers carry out theories and skills teaching simultaneously. While offering language guidance to students, they also familiarize the students with knowledge frameworks, professional terms and pragmatic features of sea-related topics. Considering that non-language majors may not have enough linguistic training, Shanghai Ocean University also offers remedial courses such as “General Linguistics” and “Advanced English Reading”, which are mandatory for the cross-professional students, but do not count as part of the graduate credit. To upgrade the teaching of sea-related S&T translation and interpretation, Dalian Ocean University adopts three teaching methods, namely integrating interactive methods into classes, inviting sea-related professional teachers for special courses, and hiring industry experts to give lectures [9].

### 3.2.3. Faculty Allocation

In terms of faculty allocation, sea-related colleges and universities not only highlight the practical orientation, but also take into account the interdisciplinary allocation of tutors. Among the teaching staff, there are expert scholars with associate senior titles or above, and lecturers with rich practical experiences in translation and interpretation. Project-based teaching, language conversion workshops and other diverse interaction models between teachers and students are employed. MTI tutors are selected by means of inviting part-time academic tutors or self-recommendation, underlining the balance between academic competences and practical abilities. The “dual tutorial system” combining on-campus academic tutors and off-campus industry tutors also can give students all-round guidance from theory to practice. For instance, Ocean University of China employs 67 off-campus tutors from government institutions (10), enterprises (42) and other affiliations (15) for its MTI program, and the teacher-student ratios on-campus and off-campus reach 2.8 and 2.88, respectively. In Dalian Maritime University and Shanghai Maritime University, there are multiple teachers specializing in “maritime translation and interpretation”. While Shanghai Ocean University independently cultivates a batch of interdisciplinary teachers with bachelor and

master degrees in linguistics, and doctoral degrees in fisheries resources and the law of the sea, in an effort to integrate with the development of its main disciplines and support the construction of its characteristic specialties.

### **3.2.4. Practical Training**

In practical training, sea-related colleges and universities leverage their horizontal partnerships with industry enterprises and vertical project resources of characteristic disciplines to provide students with an integrated training platform and practice base for applied translation and interpretation capacities.

Take Shanghai Ocean University as an example. Guided by the philosophy of Outcome-based Education (OBE), the university organized multiple translation and interpretation competitions, such as the first “Ocean Cup” National Translation Competition. Through scholarships and credit recognition, MTI students are encouraged to actively participate in all kinds of sea-related knowledge and language contexts. There are also on-campus volunteers and translation groups, which provide students with various practice opportunities. Besides, MTI students can be selected as volunteers for international conferences and events such as the Global Conference on Aquaculture and the Shanghai International Expo for relevant language services like document translation, as well as liaison and consecutive interpretation. MTI tutor teams lead the students to assist in the collected translations of marine ecological civilization, the compilation of marine literature reading and marine culture textbooks, the construction of marine-related corpus, the establishment of international fisheries economy and management public opinion center, and the provision of fisheries and aquaculture translation and language quality control services for international organizations. The students are on the way to acquire transferable professional language quality and abilities in the sea-related practical training, preparing themselves for better adaptation to the market in future.

The graduation requirements of each college or university vary from one another, including translation and interpretation practice reports, certificates, competitions, academic papers, etc. The above colleges and universities all have distinct specialties in sea-related fields, and have accumulated strong faculty resources and abundant linguistic materials, which can be well integrated into their MTI programs. By university-enterprise cooperation, industry mentors and other means, they have strengthened the “input-output” link with local economic forms, and facilitated characteristic development according to their own conditions. The industrial bilingualism and literacy acquired by students through the practical training of sea-related translation and interpretation are identical to the underlying logic of learning other types of professional translation and interpretation, so such skills are transferable to other industries.

## **4. Problems and Suggestions of Specialized MTI Training**

### **4.1. Problems**

#### **4.1.1. To-be-enhanced Interdisciplinary Integration**

The “new liberal arts” initiative emphasizes the integration of different disciplines in a real sense, rather than a simple cross-culture interaction within the humanities [10]. The fusion of the MTI programs and “harder” disciplines such as science, engineering, agriculture and medicine conforms to the development needs, but also brings challenges to the specialized development of translation and interpretation disciplines. The first is a shortage of qualified teachers. Some foreign language teachers are exposed to sea-related fields right before teaching industrial knowledge system or

translation courses. Without systematic training, their teaching contents are mainly concentrated on linguistics rather than the professional elements. The second is the limitation of students' energy. The characteristic MTI programs require the learning of language and professional knowledge at the same time, but the training time is limited for the setup of many interdisciplinary courses, so it is up to the students to decide their energy input after class. If they have little interest, they would not put their heart into it, reducing interdisciplinary learning to a formality and returning to an old path of pure language education.

#### **4.1.2. To-be-improved Language Foundation**

In recent years, a number of MTI programs have emerged. With increased enrollment, the quality of students is mixed. Students who apply for industry colleges and universities have diversified motivations for study and employment. They come from different backgrounds with intermingled language foundations, which pose challenges to the unified teaching content and progress. If the undergraduate major of a non-language candidate is inconsistent with the characteristic specialty, he or she will also face a dual dilemma of unsolid language foundation and weak professional knowledge. Moreover, how to mobilize students' interest, actively integrate them into the interdisciplinary training process, and make full use of the opportunities of advantageous disciplines are also important factors affecting the teaching quality. Of course, the essence of the MTI program is language conversion, and the pursuit of specialization must be built on the basis of improving language skills. Colleges and universities need to enrich the language training dimensions adapting to their own teachers and students, and conduct comprehensive training of talents by combining their industry resources with the market demands.

#### **4.1.3. To-be-broadened Employment Channels**

MTI is essentially an employment-oriented professional program. Although industry colleges and universities offer characteristic internship and practical training plans, there are few career planning courses or lectures offered. Bothered by uncertain modernity, some unguided students have anxiety and confusion when facing life choices such as further study and career. They tend to worry about personal development and employment, and are easy to be influenced by people around them in decision-making. In addition, employability is important in job hunting. Translation and interpretation positions have specific requirements for candidates in terms of language abilities, professional backgrounds, work experiences, qualification certificates and other aspects [11]. At present, the industries in high demand for translation and interpretation market include commerce and trade, science and technology, medicine and energy, etc. Relevant colleges and universities can integrate their own advantages and resources to figure out the ways to broaden students' employability.

#### **4.2. Suggestions**

The development of MTI programs in industry colleges and universities has a very clear career direction, challenged by a smart balance between "consolidating the language foundation" and "conducting the specialties construction". In view of existing problems, the following suggestions are proposed.

First, create a distinctive interdisciplinary context, advocating training models such as team teaching, project-based teaching, question-based teaching, thematic discussions and workshops, and guiding students to understand, accept and actively participate in interdisciplinary activities to accumulate professional knowledge and promote transferability. Second, facilitate the whole process of talent training, improving quality management in various links ranging from enrollment,

teaching, practice, graduation to employment, refining characteristic training programs based on the actual students, teachers and hardware, and forming a diversified teaching team and professional course group. Third, enhance the employability of students, promoting the training of professional abilities in line with the needs of the industry and market in addition to a sound language foundation, making good use of industry-university-research training courses, immersive lectures and projects, and deepening their understanding of career planning, professional ethics, project management and team cooperation, so as to enhance graduates' ability to obtain and maintain jobs.

## 5. Conclusion

Interdisciplinary talent training has become a golden opportunity for the MTI program to gain further development under the call of the “new liberal arts” initiative. Industry colleges and universities should better understand the connotation of professional degrees, better satisfy the industries and local actual needs based on their existing hardware and software foundations, better enrich the elements of interdisciplinary curriculum systems, and better improve students' professional quality and employability, in order to figure out a development path with their own characteristics.

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