

Why Do Undergraduates Majoring in Languages Other than English (LOTE) Switch to Another Career after Graduation? A Qualitative Exploratory Study

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Abstract: The study investigates the influencing factors of undergraduates majoring in Portuguese choosing to change careers into non-language-related ones after graduation, and how they strategically use their undergraduate learning experiences for career preparation. This study draws on semi-structured interviews with 26 undergraduates majoring in Portuguese from six universities in Beijing. The study found that the most important factor influencing students' career change was the loss of interest, the increasingly unbalanced relationship between supply and demand for the Portuguese job market, the high entry threshold of lang-related jobs, low returns, and uncertain career prospects of Portuguese jobs. However, undergraduate learning experiences in Portuguese major helped them explore career opportunities with intercultural communication skills, and open up new paths for the industry to find their ideal careers. Finally, this paper provided pedagogical implications for LOTE majors and how to help students of humanities and social sciences find new ways of career choices.

Keywords: LOTE; Career Decision; Portuguese Major; Employability; Humanity Jobs

Introduction

Graduate employment has become a global issue these days. In China, the imbalance between supply and demand in the labor market worsens the employment situation of graduates. Changing careers has become a choice for many undergraduates to cope with difficult employment. In China's undergraduates take up postgraduate studies after graduation in 2019~2022, the proportion of majors that are different from their undergraduate majors is 26% (MYCOS, 2022), among which the proportion of undergraduates majoring in literature change major in the postgraduate stage has reached 30%, next to management and economics. LOTE students are in the most embarrassing situation among language majors. LOTE majors have become the most popular and brilliant majors with China's open to the outside world, especially after China joined the WTO, a large number of universities have begun to offer LOTE majors. But now they have lost their former halo, the main reason is that the attraction of foreign enterprises gradually declines, it is no longer the preferred career choice of graduates, and foreign languages are no longer hot choices. For example, in the past years, the admission ranking of science candidates of language majors at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies—a top language university in Southern China—was about 20,000-30,000, and the admission ranking of liberal arts candidates was about 7,000-8,000, however. In 2022, however, they fell to 60000 and 30000, respectively. The pandemic leads to a fall in job opportunities, machine translation and the vast expansion of LOTE majors in universities cause a decline in the practicability and scarcity of foreign languages, all making the language universities lose their charm. LOTE undergraduate students often have more courses and lack science and engineering studies and interdisciplinary training, which makes them limited in cross-discipline. But even so, a survey indicates that before the COVID-19 pandemic, the proportion of LOTE students who are more inclined to cross-discipline is 33.08% (namely the point of cross-discipline willingness was higher than that of non-cross-discipline willingness), and the proportion was 39.71% after the pandemic (Huang & Wang, 2022).

Given that worries about the employment of LOTE graduates are being accumulated, using interviews with Portuguese undergraduates from six top-ranking universities in China in Beijing, hopes to find out the influencing factors that make Portuguese undergraduates choose to change careers after graduation (i.e., choosing a career that is not lang-related), and how Portuguese undergraduates use their Portuguese learning experience at the undergraduate level to lead them to find their ideal future career.

1. Literature Review

Currently, few studies have paid attention to the career change of undergraduate students changing careers after graduation this phenomenon. Guo and Ayoun (2022)'s study on the career intentions of hospitality students indicates that the career change of students after graduation is mainly affected by two factors: one is the lack of self-efficacy for future careers, and the other is the lack of positive outcome expectations for future careers, they believed that related occupations lack creativity, prospects are uncertain, etc. Suryani and George (2021) surveyed the career intentions of Indonesian teacher education students and found that students' own learning experiences, industry development trends in the future, and working conditions will affect students' decisions on whether to continue to pursue related careers.

The employment of LOTE students has gradually become the focus of research attention in recent years. In China, the LOTE major, as a branch of the foreign language and literature major, used to be one of the most popular majors for high school graduates, it is considered by more and more people to be a "cheating major" that is difficult to find a job these days. According to the 2022 China Undergraduate Employment Report of MYCOS, the translation major has become a "yellow card" major for the 2022 undergraduate. In other words, the unemployment of this major is high, graduation direction implementation rate, salary, and employment satisfaction are comprehensively low. A survey found that the main reasons why translation major graduates choose to change careers (engage in occupations other than interpretation and translation) are the temporary nature of translation/interpreting jobs, lacking work experience required to get a relevant job, no relevant jobs in graduates' local area, cannot find a translation/interpreting job... (Hao and Pym, 2022). China trains a large number of graduates studying foreign languages every year, who are often willing to go to economically developed areas with relatively stable institutions, schools or foreign enterprises, or Chinese-foreign joint ventures with higher personal income, resulting in the oversupply of foreign language talents in economically developed regions. Moreover, because the students of foreign language majors often only learn skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing in school, a single employment skill cannot meet the needs of employers, finally, as a result, a large number of graduates find it difficult to find suitable jobs. (Zhu, 2011)

The Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) developed by Lent et al. (1994) is a classic theory for explaining individual career choices, career interests, and career persistence. In prior literature, the career choice process was influenced by three categories of variables: person, environment, and behavior (Flores et al., 2010). Motivation is an important individual variable, which is divided into intrinsic motivation and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation is a positive experience when a person acts out of their interests or challenges. Extrinsic motivation is that even if a person does not like a certain occupation, he will finish some tasks for the expected reward (Ryan and Deci, 2000; Bainbridge, 2015). In addition, many studies suggest that career choices are also influenced by critical others and exposure to related industries (e.g., Ng et al., 2017).

2. Method

According to the principle of maximum variation sampling, this study selected 26 undergraduates in different grades of Portuguese majors in 6 universities in Beijing. Portuguese, the fifth largest language in the world, is an undergraduate major in China which started late and is a relative niche. In 2021, 34 Chinese universities were offering the Portuguese major, their numbers are much smaller than the Japanese, Russian, and German offered earlier, etc. Relatively low demand and low supply make Portuguese majors more representative of the employment state of LOTE majors. There are 8 universities offering Portuguese majors in Beijing, which is the city with the highest concentration of Portuguese undergraduate education in China. As China's economic, cultural and political center, LOTE students also have more job opportunities in Beijing. The six sample universities—Peking University (PKU), University of International Business and Economics (UIBE), Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU), Communication University of China (CUC), Beijing Language and Culture University (BLCU), and Beijing International Studies University (BISU)—all have high rankings in China, and there is certain levels difference. BFSU, BLCU, and BISU are universities with foreign language majors as their main disciplines (short for foreign

studies university, FSU), their Portuguese majors focus on students' language and translation skills, while the other three schools' Portuguese majors focus more on the university's strong disciplines.

Through word of mouth and snowball sampling, I invited 26 interviewees in total. There were 22 females and 4 males. When interviewing, one was freshman, 11 were sophomore, five were junior, and nine were senior. The number of interviewees from each of the six sample universities was roughly equal, and the interviewees from the three FSUs (BFSU, BLCU, BISU) accounted for exactly half. Given that motivation plays a key role in individual career choices (e.g., Ng et al., 2017), to increase the otherness of samples, the study not only collected samples who were not interested in Portuguese but also collected samples who were interested in Portuguese when applying for the exam. Therefore, I divided the interviewees into two groups. Group A students (n=11) chose Portuguese as their undergraduate major because they were interested in language learning, or were interested in learning Portuguese. Group B students (n=15) chose Portuguese as their undergraduate major because they believed that learning Portuguese would help them get better job opportunities or get into better schools. The interviews were collected from May to June 2022, and it was carried out online through video conferencing software, each interview lasted about 25 minutes. The main questions of the semi-structured interview are the reasons for choosing the Portuguese major, future career plans, career preparations, the reasons for leaving the Portuguese major and choosing to change careers, and the impact of undergraduate study experience on oneself.

The study transcribed the data verbatim and imported it into N-Vivo 12 for thematic analysis. The analysis way adopts the thematic analysis method. Following Miles et al. (2013), after rereading the verbatim transcription several times, given each research question, I code the data inductively by first labeling the segments of the same connotation group to form codes, and then classified all codes of the same theme, and summarized several important themes. To protect the anonymity of the participants, in finding, I only show the group (A/B), year of study (Y1-Y4), gender (M/F), and university type (FSU/ non-FSU).

3. Finding: Reason for Changing Career

3.1 Loss of Interest

The most influential factor mentioned by interviewees in the interviews was the loss of interest in the Portuguese language during their undergraduate studies. The proportion of such students in group A and group B is about two-thirds (7 out of 11 and 10 out of 15). For the reasons for the loss of interest of the A and B groups, there are the same influencing factors and their features.

Interviewees who expressed their loss of interest in Portuguese language learning generally believed that language learning was a repetitive and boring process, it lacked the improvement of thinking logic and cognitive ability. They believe that they have devoted more time to major study than their classmates in other majors, but they have little sense of achievement in their studies. The lack of positive feedback makes it difficult for them to continue in-depth learning of Portuguese. Interviewees had at least 12 years of English education, and they tended to compare their English learning experiences when learning Portuguese.

I feel that I have put a lot more personal effort into this than I originally felt I needed to, but the feedback I get isn't as great as the sense of achievement I've gotten from learning English or other liberal arts before. It wasn't as easy as I thought. (A14, Y3, F, FSU)

Before entering the university, they generally looked forward to liberal arts education, expecting that higher education will give them a new learning experience, but the experience of learning LOTE often disappoints them. Too many and single specialized courses make universities lose the charm of language learning:

Our curriculum is mainly specialized courses. Every day I felt like I went to a language class and didn't have the feeling of getting into university. (A3, Y2, F, FSU)

I never thought that learning LOTE would be similar to learning English in high school, just like a primary school student. What I felt later was like a group of elementary school students went to learn a dialect. (B11, Y2, F, FSU)

All the interviewees believed that foreign teachers and exchange experiences were very helpful in cultivating interest in learning Portuguese, and could also promote the improvement of their language level. However, due to the impact of COVID-19, foreign teachers in many schools can only teach online, and exchange programs with overseas universities are also affected. This partly reduces students' interest in language learning, as mentioned by two seniors (B21, B22).

More importantly, many interviewees expressed that in mainland China, English is undoubtedly the first foreign language, and British and American cultures have always had wide implications and attraction among students. In contrast, the culture of Portuguese-speaking countries is too niche in China, so it is difficult to touch relevant cultural works. Two interviewees mentioned:

On the Mainland, the scope of application of Portuguese is more limited than that of larger languages, and resources are few. It's not like English has some movies, TV series can attract you, it will make people feel a little bored. (A3, Y2, F, FSU)
I don't think I have an interest in learning English when I learn Portuguese. Maybe because after I understood its culture deeply, I found that I am not that interested, or I am more interested in English. (A5, Y3, M, FSU)

3.2 Increasingly Unbalanced Supply and Demand in the Portuguese Job

Market

The current situation of China's domestic job market also greatly affects the choices of Portuguese students. From the supply side, China's previous "foreign language craze" has caused a large number of universities to start offering LOTE majors, and a large number of students have poured into the industry, which added a considerable number of graduates and professionals.

When I searched, many people said that Portuguese students had the highest salary among LOTE students, but now we feel that the window period for Portuguese is gradually passing. Even in such a relatively emerging minority language, talent is gradually saturated. (B17, Y2, F, non-FSU)

The supply side continues to increase, while from the demand side, especially affected by the pandemic, the demand in China's domestic market continues to decline. One recent graduate offered his observations after a year of job hunting:

The demand for us LOTE students, including some expatriate positions, is actually a lot less, so we are not as easy as the students who graduated before. (B6, Y4, M, FSU)

3.3 Portuguese-related Jobs Are High in Entry Threshold and Low in

Returns

Working as a full-time translator or college Portuguese teacher is one of the career options that many Portuguese students have. But after in-depth contact with Portuguese majors, they have their views on full-time translators and college teachers: there are very few full-time translators in China, and most of them are undertaken part-time by college teachers. However, the threshold for teachers in Chinese universities is gradually increasing, as one student mentioned:

Being a teacher means you may have to do a Ph.D., but I feel that if I always want to study language or do a master's degree in linguistics or translation, it needs more lasting perseverance, it may not be my preferred path for me. (A26, Y3, F, FSU)

Apart from the high entry threshold and the need for continuous further study, the overall working conditions of professional translators in China are also unsatisfactory, which is mainly reflected in shrinking demand, low wages, and poor stability.

In the translation market, the price of work that I can reach is very low, and this price does not make me willing to do it. Thousands of words are probably only fifty or sixty, or no more than one hundred. (B24, Y4, F, non-FSU)

To ensure the stability of a source of life, doing a full-time Portuguese translator requires a certain level of financial affordability and certain risks. (A26, Y3, F, FSU)

3.4 Uncertain Career Prospects

Compared to the above points, the more obvious and direct reason is that most jobs related to Portuguese are faced with the dilemma of having to change careers after working for several years: Portuguese cannot be used as a productivity tool for a long time.

(Except for lecturers and translators) I think they will generally change careers after a few years for other jobs. For example, in a company, it is impossible to have Portuguese-related tasks. It must involve not only Portuguese translation but also other businesses and other work contents. (A7, Y4, F, FSU)

Earlier studies have revealed a similar phenomenon. According to the Blue Book of the 2022 China Undergraduate Employment Report of MYCOS, the initial monthly income of foreign language and literature graduates is lower than that of graduates of other majors, and the salary increase after working for a few years is also significantly lower than the average.

Whether it is from future possibilities, career ceilings, or short-term economic compensation, changing business and staying in LOTE are two completely different paths. The career path of LOTE majors is still too narrow... (A9, Y4, M, non-FSU)

Many Portuguese students are also worried about going abroad to work. They are afraid that working abroad will make them completely divorced from domestic social relations and lose the basis for development after returning home. They are also worried that their personal safety and property safety will not be guaranteed when they go abroad, whether they will be unemployed after returning from work abroad, and the current "compilation fever" in China, they hope to seek a stable job, these factors make them think whether to continue using Portuguese for employment. A student mentioned:

The continuity of work is also a problem... Like foreign companies, my mother feels that it is not stable, in the first few years, it will be tiring and the salary will be relatively high, but the problem of unemployment may be more serious later. (B13, Y2, F, FSU)

4. Strategies of Using the Undergraduate Study of Portuguese Major to Create Employment Advantages

4.1 Explore Career Opportunities with Intercultural Communication Skills

The interviewed Portuguese students expressed that they had more exchange and cross-cultural communication experience than other non-language majors. They often use this experience and their language advantages to strengthen their intercultural communication skills to emerge in the labor market. Many interviewees mentioned that not only employers in the traditional foreign trade industry but also those in many industries will value interviewees with intercultural experience, as mentioned below:

I feel that writing my experience as an exchange student on my resume can also make me stand out from other resumes. Because after all, I have gone out, maybe during the interview, people will look at me a few more times. (A12, Y2, F, FSU)

Interviewee expressed that intercultural experience broadened their horizons for action in the labor market, and helped them find and judge competent industries and areas. Intercultural communication skills seem to give them a broader international perspective than graduates from other majors, make them look beyond the domestic labor market, allow them to look towards the various job opportunities abroad, and rationally evaluate the feasibility of these job opportunities. One interviewee mentioned:

In fact, I feel that there is still a relatively large market for learning Portuguese, there are many so-called blue ocean markets with good development potential in Brazil and those countries in Africa. I think it is indeed very potential from the demand side. (A9, Y4, M, non-FSU)

In addition, some students who continue their studies also generally believe that intercultural experience and intercultural communication skills will help them adapt to postgraduate studies – most of them choose to go abroad for taking up postgraduate studies, mainly in Portuguese-speaking or English-speaking countries. One interviewee mentioned:

I feel living in an international environment for a while may help me in my postgraduate studies in the future, because I can be more willing to communicate with foreigners and integrate into their life circles, it also helps me to adapt to the environment in Europe more quickly. (B6, Y4, M, FSU)

4.2 Open up New Paths for the Industry

Many interviewees began to think as an entrepreneur before entering the job market, and proactively create new career paths while looking for job opportunities. For example, they are planning to use his intercultural experience to operate we-media in Portuguese-speaking countries/regions.

I want to record my life on we-media, the biggest feature of my life is cross-city communication. This became my access point. My knowledge is to explore the local things and features of Macao and Portugal. Therefore, my videos will be refreshing to others. (A1, Y2, F, FSU)

Many interviewees who chose to pursue postgraduate studies through interdisciplinary studies and then changed careers did not give up their advantages in Portuguese language skills. When they choose their majors and future careers, they will consciously look for the possible point combining new professional fields and Portuguese, and strive to open up a blue ocean market, as quoted below:

We also touched on elective courses in this field (international relations and Latin American studies) when we were freshmen, and then found that we were quite interested, in addition, I could also use the languages I learned during undergraduate study, so it wasn't a complete waste. I just thought it was appropriate. (A3, Y2, F, FSU)

5. Discussion

Taking Portuguese majors as an example, the study aims to explore the factors that influence the career change of LOTE students and their career preparation. I found that the loss of interest due to various reasons, the unreasonable design of university courses, the weakness of Portuguese culture, and the uncertain career prospects of Portuguese jobs, all cause students to want to choose a new career path. Compared to students of other majors, they have more intercultural communication experience and stronger language skills, so they have broader horizons for action and competitiveness in the labor market. Moreover, they are also actively creating new career paths.

5.1 The teaching of LOTE

The problems caused by the increasing dominance of English as a 'world language' for the learning of 'non-world languages' have long been noticed and studied by scholars (Busse, 2013). In China, English is the first foreign language for almost all teenagers. English culture also has a central position in the world, while LOTE culture is in a peripheral position. Many interviewees pointed out that they chose the LOTE major because they liked English, only to find that LOTE did not attract them as much as English.

Previous studies suggest that the loss of learning enjoyment is one of the main reasons for the sharp decline in the intrinsic motivation of minor language students, and the difficulty of the language tasks students engage in is one of the decisive factors affecting interest (Busse, 2013). By distinguishing the interviewees' interest in Portuguese learning when applying for the Portuguese major, this study found that despite differences in the initial interest of the two groups of students, they both revealed an obvious loss of interest in Portuguese learning after a period of professional study, and this phenomenon is not significantly different between FSU and non-FSU.

Compared to students majoring in English, LOTE students enter university classrooms with zero foundation, which requires them to master a language more quickly in a relatively short period, and it is a challenge for both teachers and students. Busse's (2013) qualitative analysis result of undergraduates majoring in German in the UK suggests that reading German literature, writing essays in German, and coping with explicit grammar tuition are three areas where the challenge difficulty is least compliant with the needs of the students, however, these three issues are precisely the core elements of foreign language learning. Therefore, it is the uppermost priority to improve the teaching quality of LOTE students. The study identified two main training modes of LOTE majors at present: the language-centered specialist mode under

pragmatism and the content-centered generalist mode under the liberal arts education concept. Undoubtedly, the specialist mode has its advantages. It highlights the improvement and polishing of the language ability and translation ability of LOTE students and thus benefits students who want to find a job through their language advantages; these students tend to have a more solid and profound foundation and thus will be favored by employers. But interviewees pointed out that such a training model makes it very easy for them to lose interest in language learning. Consistent with the research of Hao and Pym (2022), I suggest that for universities that carry out the specialist mode, the major setting can understand the fields that students want to work in in the future and provide assistance as much as possible, help students develop "the skills that are most transferable" to a range of language-based occupations, extend the incorporation of transferable skills pertinent area studies, and abandon disciplinary isolationism" (Hao and Pym, 2022: 14-15). The features of the generalist model are also very obvious, one of our interviewees from non-FSU pointed out that the foreign language major in his school is largely academic teaching, it is basically literary research. This model is very useful for students who desire an academic path in the future, and it can also match the interests of many students. However, schools lack real language translation training, for students who want to find lang-related jobs, when they enter the job market, they are at a disadvantage compared to students of the specialist mode. In addition, because the curriculum focuses too much on academic research, it is easy to make some students who simply like language and want language training feel confused and uncomfortable, and do not understand what they are learning. In my opinion, the specialist model and the generalist model have their pros and cons, and we should find a balance between "interesting" and "useful". From the "interesting" angle, teachers' conditions permitting in schools, after students touched a certain level of language teaching, they can conduct appropriate diversions, allowing them to choose more language translation training or learn more general knowledge or interdisciplinary content. This is also mentioned in the specialist mode. We need to understand students as independent individuals, and what their own career plans and personal interests are. After the diversion, students can study courses that match their career plans and personal interests, thereby helping them improve their competitiveness in the job market and achieve the "useful" purpose.

5.2 New Lines of Employment of Humanities and Social Sciences (HSS)

Majors

At present, the employment difficulties of students in the field of humanities and social sciences have become a global consensus. Previously, a large number of studies believed that the job market exists objectively, and graduates need to adjust themselves to adapt to the job market (e.g., Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). Due to the disadvantage of students in the field of humanities and social sciences, there have been some voices such as "excessive training in humanities and social sciences" and "useless majors in humanities and social sciences" (e.g., Frassinelli, 2019). The study found that there is indeed a certain imbalance between supply and demand, but moreover, we believe that humanities and social sciences can create new possibilities for society. From our survey, LOTE students have found their way out through reasonable planning and preparation after graduation. The features of LOTE students are that they have more intercultural experiences and stronger language skills, which help them acquire better intercultural communication skills. With this ability, they can more easily expand their horizons for action in the labor market. Consequently, they can see broader job opportunities and ways out. After that, the employment pressure of this major fosters entrepreneurship during their undergraduate studies. They use their agency to think about their advantages, especially the language advantages, and which fields that are not related to Portuguese can be linked to create new job opportunities themselves.

Therefore, the training of foreign languages must not stop at language teaching only but should break through the barriers among majors, abandon disciplinary isolationism, and achieve interdisciplinary training by increasing the flexibility of the course selection mechanism, which is in line with Hao and Pym (2022). Wang (2021) also called for the exploration of the multi-type training of minor language majors, such as polylingual training and compound training. The study also found that there are certain problems in the current Chinese universities in opening up the course selection mechanism. For example, there are too many curricula, fixed timetables, and a large proportion of compulsory courses, which conflict with the time of foreign speciality courses to a large extent, thus affecting inter-disciplinary learning. Therefore, universities should actively

carry out coordinated and more flexible subject training for LOTE students, actively create an interdisciplinary platform and help them better achieve major integration.

In addition, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global economy has made it increasingly difficult for college students to find a job, and majors with a higher degree of internationalization are the first to be affected, including LOTE, (Mok, Xiong, & Ye, 2021). Echoing Guo and Ayoun (2022), the study found that the pandemic has indeed led to the reduction of jobs, especially the reduction of expatriate jobs, students need to be more active in finding new ways and jobs, explore new employment channels or jobs that can be combined with this major, however, many students expressed that the school's employment assistance for graduates was very limited under the pandemic. Therefore, program coordinators should also have the responsibility to carry out more market research, unite potential employers, actively use alumni resources, and give students more career advice (Saito & Pham, 2021). Considering that the COVID-19 pandemic may exist for a long time, future research should continue to explore how we can help LOTE students with their career development in the context of deglobalization.

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