

# From “Pure Language” to “Language+”: Cross-Disciplinary Graduate Study Choices of Spanish Majors at a Local Chinese University

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**Abstract:** A total of 142 graduates (classes 2010–2021) from the Spanish program at Harbin Normal University were surveyed to understand why so many pursue cross-disciplinary graduate studies. The data show that 56.34% of graduates enrolled in graduate programs, and among them, 63.75% left the pure language track mostly for business fields (23.75%). Half of all graduate students enrolled after working, and 50% of those decided to pursue a degree only after entering the workforce. We were surprised to find that 47.5% of delayed-entry graduates cited “pure language skills insufficient in the workplace” as their main reason, nine times higher than AI anxiety or expatriate career ceiling. Moreover, the primary drivers of cross-disciplinary choices were positive: better career prospects (37.5%) and discovering needs on the job (22.5%), while loss of interest in pure language accounted for only 18.75%. Only 6.25% developed cross-disciplinary interest from undergraduate electives, compared to 22.5% from workplace exposure, a 1:3.6 ratio that we consider a curriculum failure. We argue that cross-disciplinary graduate study is not an “escape” from Spanish but a rational human capital investment responding to labor market feedback. We therefore challenge the “talent outflow” narrative and call for embedding “language + business” modules, upgrading overseas exchange with career preparation tasks, and systematic curriculum reform based on graduate tracking.

**Keywords:** Spanish major; Cross-disciplinary graduate study; Workplace-motivated; Human capital theory; Graduate tracking survey

**Online publication:** June 12, 2026

## 1. Introduction

Why do a growing number of Spanish major graduates choose cross-disciplinary graduate studies? Is this a “talent outflow”<sup>[1]</sup> or a successful “interdisciplinary effectiveness”<sup>[2]</sup>? Existing discussions rely on media reports or normative reasoning. We lack empirical data from long-term graduate tracking, especially comparing those who enter graduate school immediately versus after working. This study addresses three questions:

(1) What proportion of Spanish graduates pursue cross-disciplinary paths, and in which fields?

- (2) Is the decision driven by “loss of interest” or by skill gaps discovered at work?
- (3) Do immediate and delayed entrants show different motivation structures?

Drawing on human capital theory <sup>[3]</sup> and career development theory <sup>[4]</sup>, we propose a workplace-motivated mechanism.

## 2. Literature review

We review three strands of literature: reforms of foreign language education under the New Liberal Arts, labor market changes affecting the Spanish major, and existing evidence on cross-disciplinary graduate study. We then identify the gaps this study fills.

### 2.1. Reform of foreign language education under the New Liberal Arts

China’s “New Liberal Arts” initiative, launched in 2019, encourages intra- and cross-disciplinary integration <sup>[5]</sup>. Jiang *et al.* <sup>[6]</sup> noted that adding area studies as a core direction expands foreign language boundaries. Shu <sup>[7]</sup> argued that foreign language programs’ core competitiveness lies in “acquiring and applying specialized knowledge through a foreign language.” The *Outline of the Plan for the Development of a Powerful Nation in Education (2024–2035)* explicitly calls for “deepening New Liberal Arts construction and promoting disciplinary integration.” However, how such policies translate into concrete curriculum changes at local universities remains an empirical question.

### 2.2. Labor market changes and the Spanish major

The employment landscape for foreign language graduates has shifted. Between 2018 and 2022, 109 Chinese universities discontinued 28 foreign language-related programs <sup>[8]</sup>. AI is reshaping the language services industry: the Translators Association of China (2025) <sup>[9]</sup> reports that over 90% of translation companies now invest in AI and large language models.

For Spanish majors, the market context is strongly tied to China-Latin America trade. Total merchandise trade between China and Latin America reached US\$518.5 billion in 2024, up 6% year-on-year <sup>[10]</sup>. As Chinese enterprises expand in Latin America, demand for “Spanish + professional skills” grows. Yet a survey of Chinese universities found that less than 40% of Spanish programs require international trade courses <sup>[11]</sup>. We see this supply-demand mismatch as a critical driver forcing graduates to fill skill gaps after entering the workforce.

### 2.3. Cross-disciplinary graduate study: Evidence and gaps

Previous research has three major gaps. First, long-term tracking data covering more than a decade are scarce. Second, few studies separate immediate from delayed graduate study entrants. Third, motivational structures (“escape” vs. “investment”) have not been empirically tested. This study fills these gaps by focusing on a local university in Northeast China and using a 12-cohort survey.

## 3. Research design

### 3.1. Context and participants

We conducted this study at Harbin Normal University (HNU), a provincial key university in Heilongjiang

Province, Northeast China. The Spanish program, established in 2009, runs a “2+1+1” international model: two years on campus, one year exchange in a Spanish-speaking country, and one year for thesis and internship. Every enrolled student has exchange opportunities.

We collected 142 valid responses from graduates of classes 2010–2021 (effective response rate 43%). The sample includes 27 males (19.0%), 114 females (80.3%), and one non-disclosure. The distribution across years is balanced.

### 3.2. Instrument and data collection

We designed a self-administered questionnaire covering demographics, graduate study pathways and timing, motivations (distinguishing immediate and delayed), current employment, skill gaps, curriculum feedback, and open-ended questions. We distributed the survey online via alumni group chats between December 2025 and February 2026.

### 3.3. Variable definitions

“Graduate study” includes completed or current master’s/doctoral programs.

“Immediate” enrollment in the same calendar year as graduation.

“Delayed” enrollment one or more years after graduation.

“Pure language track” Spanish linguistics, literature, or translation. All other subjects are “cross-disciplinary.”

Cohort comparison: Classes 2010–2015 ( $n = 54$ , “traditional period”) vs. Classes 2016–2021 ( $n = 88$ , “post-2016 period”). We chose 2016 as the cutoff because it marks the acceleration of the Belt and Road Initiative with Latin America; by 2024, 22 Latin American countries had signed cooperation documents with China.

## 4. Results

We present findings in five parts: the magnitude and trend of cross-disciplinary study; the role of workplace experience; motivations for delayed-entry graduate study; reasons for cross-disciplinary choices; and qualitative illustrations.

### 4.1. Cross-disciplinary study: Magnitude and trends

Among 142 graduates, 80 pursued or are pursuing graduate studies at a rate of 56.34%. **Table 1** shows the subject distribution.

**Table 1.** Subject areas of graduate study ( $n = 80$ )

Subject area		% of graduate students
Spanish linguistics/literature/translation	22	27.50%
International business/trade/finance	19	23.75%
Education/Chinese language pedagogy	11	13.75%
Journalism & communication	7	8.75%
International politics/IR/area studies	5	6.25%
Law (Juris Master)	3	3.75%
Other (management, history, tourism, etc.)	21	26.25%

Only 22 students remained in pure language studies. We find this striking: 63.75% of those who pursued

graduate studies deliberately shifted away from a pure language track. Moreover, business-related fields alone accounted for nearly one-quarter of all graduate students. We argue that this pattern reflects a rational response to labor market signals: graduates perceive that combining Spanish with business skills offers the clearest return on investment.

Temporal comparison strengthens this conclusion. Among Classes 2010–2015, the cross-disciplinary proportion among graduate students was 58.6%; among Classes 2016–2021, it rose to 67.3%, an increase of 8.7 percentage points. We observe that the trend is not only persisting but intensifying, likely due to the deepening of China-Latin America economic integration.

#### 4.2. The role of workplace experience: Delayed entrants

Of the 80 graduate students, 40 (50%) were immediate and 40 (50%) were delayed. **Table 2** reports their first-exam outcomes.

**Table 2.** First-exam outcomes among delayed entry graduates ( $n = 40$ )

Outcome	<i>n</i>	%
Passed first attempt (delayed by timing)	10	25.0%
Failed first attempt, succeeded later	7	17.5%
Decided only after working (never took exam before)	20	50.0%
Still in process	0	0.0%

emphasize that 50% of delayed-entry graduates decided to pursue graduate studies only after working, they had never taken the entrance exam before. Thus, workplace experience itself generates new demand for graduate education. This finding challenges the assumption that most graduate students simply postponed an existing plan.

#### 4.3. Motivations: Workplace-motivated vs. interest-loss

**Table 3** shows factors motivating delayed-entry graduate students (multiple responses).

**Table 3.** Workplace factors driving delayed-entry graduate study ( $n = 40$ )

Factor	Choices	% of delayed group
Pure language skills insufficient in workplace	19	47.5%
Industry demands cross-disciplinary knowledge	10	25.0%
Shift from frontline to management/professional roles	6	15.0%
Colleagues/friends all pursuing graduate studies	6	15.0%
Returning to China, domestic jobs require master’s degree	5	12.5%
Career ceiling as expatriate interpreter	2	5.0%
AI impact on translation jobs	2	5.0%

We find that 47.5% cited “pure language skills insufficient in the workplace” nine times higher than “AI impact” (5%) or “expatriate career ceiling” (5%). This points to a structural skill gap, not simply job-specific bottlenecks. We interpret this as evidence that graduates encounter a fundamental mismatch: their training provides only language, but jobs demand language plus business, negotiation, or management skills.

**Table 4** presents reasons for cross-disciplinary study (all cross-disciplinary students,  $n = 51$ ). Those who stayed in pure language are shown for reference.

**Table 4.** Reasons for choosing cross-disciplinary study ( $n = 51$ )

Reason	Choices	% of cross-disciplinary
Better career prospects of cross-disciplinary fields	30	37.50%
Did not choose cross-disciplinary (reference)	29	--
Discovered workplace needs on the job	18	22.50%
Lost interest in pure language	15	18.75%
Low salary/slow promotion in pure language jobs	11	13.75%
Interest from undergraduate electives	5	6.25%
Work too tiring, wanted to return to campus	3	3.75%

Two findings here challenge the “talent outflow” narrative. First, the combined proportion of those citing career prospects (37.5%) and on-the-job discovery (22.5%) is more than triple that of those who say they lost interest (18.75%). We therefore conclude that most cross-disciplinary choices are driven by positive, future-oriented considerations, not by disillusionment with the Spanish major.

Second, the ratio of workplace-induced interest (22.5%) to curriculum-induced interest (6.25%) is 3.6 to 1. This leads us to ask a pointed question: Why does on-the-job exposure teach students the value of business knowledge nearly four times more effectively than our own undergraduate electives? We see this as a failure of curriculum design, not of student motivation.

#### 4.4. Motivational differences: Immediate vs. delayed

**Table 5** compares motivations for graduate study between immediate ( $n = 40$ ) and delayed ( $n = 40$ ) entrants.

**Table 5.** Motivational differences (multiple responses)

Motivation	Immediate (%)	Delayed (%)	Difference (p.p.)
Enhance job competitiveness	87.5	82.5	-5
Avoid early employment	22.5	12.5	-10
Skill gaps discovered on job	2.5	32.5	+30
Career advancement requires master’s degree	7.5	17.5	+10
Academic research interest	12.5	12.5	0
Transfer from expatriate to domestic post	0.0	5.0	+5

Immediate entrants show “signal-type” motivation: enhancing credentials and avoiding early employment. Delayed entrants show “supplement-type” motivation: they need to fill real skill gaps revealed by work. We argue that these two types of graduate study have different social implications. Signal-type may reflect credential inflation, while supplement-type signals a genuine demand for curriculum reform.

#### 4.5. Qualitative illustrations

*“After two years as a project interpreter in Peru, I found I could do nothing but interpret. Returning to China, no good jobs accepted me. So I switched to international trade.”* (Male, class 2016)

*“Working as a Spanish customer service rep in cross-border e-commerce, I realized I lacked e-commerce*

*operations and supply chain knowledge. I took the MBA exam in my third year.” (Female, class 2015)*

*“I thought good Spanish would be enough. Then I discovered that overseas market work requires negotiation, logistics, and local laws. I had to go back for a master’s.” (Female, class 2014)*

These narratives reinforce our quantitative findings: graduates encounter concrete skill deficiencies, recognize the limits of “pure language,” and decide to return for cross-disciplinary education.

## **5. Discussion**

We interpret the main findings, discuss the workplace-motivated mechanism, the failure of early cross-disciplinary exposure, the role of AI as a background factor, and the study’s limitations.

### **5.1. The “workplace-motivated” mechanism**

Our data strongly support a workplace-motivated interpretation. Delayed entrants: Half of all graduate students were primarily motivated by skill gaps discovered on the job (47.5%), not by AI anxiety (5%) or expatriate career ceiling (5%). We see this as a rational human capital investment<sup>[3]</sup> triggered by workplace bottlenecks<sup>[4]</sup>.

The “talent outflow” view<sup>[1]</sup> is not supported: “lost interest” accounted for only 18.75% of cross-disciplinary choices. The “interdisciplinary effectiveness” view<sup>[2]</sup> is partially supported, but we refine it: cross-disciplinary study is an investment response to labor market signals. Graduates are not abandoning Spanish; they are upgrading to “Spanish + X.” In fact, 61.2% of all respondents work in jobs involving Latin America, and 33.8% have expatriate experience there. Thus, we argue that the problem is not a disinterest in Spanish, but the failure of our curriculum to provide complementary skills.

### **5.2. The failure of early cross-disciplinary exposure**

Only 6.25% of cross-disciplinary students developed interest from undergraduate electives, compared to 22.5% from workplace contact. We were initially surprised by this large gap. One might expect that a properly designed “New Liberal Arts” curriculum would expose students to adjacent fields like international trade early on. Yet our data suggest the opposite: the classroom is far less effective than the workplace in conveying the practical value of complementary skills.

We argue that this is not merely a missed opportunity; it imposes real costs on graduates. Instead of entering the job market with a “language + business” toolkit, they enter with “language only,” discover the deficit at work, and then return to university—sacrificing years of potential career progression. If our curriculum were better aligned with labor market demands, we would expect the proportion of curriculum-induced interest to be much higher. The current 1:3.6 ratio is, in our view, unacceptable for a program that claims to prepare students for industry.

Survey feedback confirms this: the top curriculum deficiency cited was “economic/business knowledge” (46.0%), and the most desired new mandatory course was “International Trade Practice” (26.6%). These findings align with Li’s<sup>[11]</sup> observation that fewer than 40% of Spanish programs require business courses.

### **5.3. AI as a background factor, not the main driver**

Despite media narratives emphasizing AI disruption, only 5% of delayed-entry graduates cited AI impact as a reason for graduate study. We caution against over-emphasizing AI as the primary threat to Spanish majors. The real concern is not that “AI can translate,” but that graduates do not know how to do anything

beyond translating. This distinction is critical. If the core problem were simply “AI can translate,” the remedy might be to compete on speed, a losing proposition. But if the core problem is “pure language skills are insufficient,” the remedy is to add competencies that AI cannot easily replicate: business negotiation, project management, cross-cultural communication, and regulatory knowledge. We argue that this reframing shifts the conversation from defensive (fearing replacement) to proactive (building unique human advantages).

## **5.4. Limitations**

We acknowledge limitations. First, our data come from a single local university, limiting generalizability. Second, self-reported, cross-sectional data may suffer from recall bias. Third, we did not collect employer perspectives, so demand-side validation is missing. Future research should include multiple universities, employer interviews, and longitudinal designs.

## **6. Conclusion and implications**

We summarize the main findings and derive concrete implications for curriculum reform.

### **6.1. Main findings**

- (1) Cross-disciplinary graduate study is the mainstream choice (63.75%), and the trend is strengthening. Business is the top destination.
- (2) Half of graduate students are delayed entrants, and half of those decide to pursue graduate studies only after working, workplace experience generates new education demand.
- (3) The primary driver is skill gaps in pure language competencies (47.5% among delayed entrants), nine times higher than AI impact or expatriate career ceiling.
- (4) Cross-disciplinary choices are positively motivated by career prospects and discovered workplace needs (60% combined), not by loss of interest (18.75%).
- (5) Undergraduate cross-disciplinary exposure is severely deficient: only 6.25% developed interest from electives vs. 22.5% from workplace contact, a 1:3.6 ratio we consider a curriculum failure.

### **6.2. Implications for curriculum reform**

First, embed “language + business” modules at the undergraduate level. We recommend mandatory courses like International Trade Practice, Business Spanish, and Overview of Latin American Economy and Trade.

Second, upgrade overseas exchange (the “2+1+1” model) with career preparation tasks. Predeparture assignments such as market analysis of a Latin American country or case studies of Chinese enterprises abroad can turn “language immersion” into “career preparation.” Third, institute systematic graduate tracking. Surveys like this one should be repeated every 3–5 years, using alumni feedback to revise the curriculum. We have demonstrated the feasibility and value of this approach.

Fourth, recognize the real challenge: skill gaps, not AI replacement. Reform should focus on building competencies that AI cannot easily replicate negotiation, project management, cultural mediation, and regulatory knowledge. We believe this reframing is critical for the future of Spanish programs in local universities.

### 6.3. Final remark

The phenomenon of cross-disciplinary graduate study among Spanish majors is not a “waste of talent” but a rational adjustment to labor market signals. Graduates are not leaving Spanish; they are building on it. The real question for our discipline is whether the undergraduate curriculum can provide sufficient cross-disciplinary exposure early enough, so that students do not have to wait until they are on the job to discover that pure language skills are insufficient.

### Funding

This research was supported by the Heilongjiang Provincial College Students’ Innovation and Entrepreneurship Training Program under Grant No. S202510231163X, titled “Language Connecting Latin America: A Study on Cross-border E-commerce Model of Heilongjiang Black Fungus in Mexico.”

### Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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