

The Situation, Policies, and Development of Foreign Language Education in Contemporary China

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Abstract: Foreign language education is an important part of Chinese education, but the overall foreign language education in China is still relatively underdeveloped. Foreign language education and policies in contemporary China are closely related to China's political, economic, and social development. The contemporary Chinese foreign language education and policies, since the establishment of New China in 1949, can be divided into four periods. The first period is a period of domination by the Russian language (1949–1956), the second period is a period of exploration and transformation (1956–1966), the third period is a period of interruption (1966–1978), and the fourth period is a period of development and improvement (1978 to present). Understanding foreign language education and policies in contemporary Chinese universities can contribute to the future development of foreign language education and policies in China.

Keywords: Foreign language education; Foreign language policy; Language policy

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1. Introduction

Foreign languages in China usually refer to the languages of foreign countries, such as Russian, English, German, Spanish, Japanese, Korean, etc. Foreign language education refers to various foreign language teaching activities carried out by educational institutions. Foreign language policies are laws, regulations, and directives related to foreign language education formulated by the government. Foreign language policy is an important part of language policy. Language policy usually refers to large-scale national policies, measures, plans, and reforms formulated and implemented by the government, aiming at changing the way of speaking or literacy of the whole society^[1]. Understanding the situation and policies of foreign language education in contemporary China is significant for the formulation and development of future foreign language education and policies in China.

2. Situation of foreign language education in new China

2.1. Foreign language education among Chinese students

There is a large number of people learning foreign language in China. China has carried out extensive foreign language education at various levels such as basic education, vocational education, and higher education. The number of people who have learned foreign languages has reached nearly 400 million, and foreign language education ranks among the top in the world ^[2]. Almost all universities offer a two-year compulsory course in college English foundation. In fact, Chinese students learn foreign languages, especially English language, from junior high school onwards, while some schools even offer foreign language courses from primary school onwards. Parents who are financially capable and value foreign language education even allow their children to learn foreign languages at an early age. From this, China's foreign language education, especially English education, has coherence. By the end of their second year of university, Chinese students should have at least 8 years of foreign language learning experience.

2.2. Insufficient quality of foreign language education

Although most Chinese students have at least 8 years of foreign language learning, their overall language proficiency is not high enough, especially their listening and speaking skills which require improvement. This may be due to the disconnect between Chinese foreign language education and the actual needs in work and life. The main motivations for students to learn English are instrumental, which include passing various exams, achieving graduation requirements, securing a good job, and studying abroad. In foreign language classes, except for the teacher's roll call, students generally do not answer questions actively. Many students cannot understand foreign language, let alone speak it. When students encounter foreigners, they tend to dodge and express that they cannot speak English. After 8 to 10 years of foreign language learning, many students are unable to read original foreign language books proficiently, they especially cannot understand or speak the foreign language, making it difficult to communicate directly with foreigners ^[3]. This indicates that the quality of foreign language teaching in China is insufficient. There is still room for improvement in the quality of foreign language education.

2.3. Traditional teaching methods in foreign language education

Many foreign language classes still adopt traditional teacher-centered teaching methods. The teacher occupies a dominant position in foreign language classes, that is to say, the teacher teaches in front of the class during the entire period, and students listen quietly to the teacher in their seats. In the classroom, there are only lectures given by the teacher, without any discussion among students. Both teachers and students are accustomed to this kind of teaching method. Foreign language teachers constantly impart knowledge, while students actively or passively accept it. This teaching method has remained focused on the input stage, and students are also accustomed to this passive input with few opportunities for output for a long time ^[4].

2.4. Low number of foreign languages

In China, the quantity of foreign languages is relatively small. There is a significant gap in the number of foreign languages in China compared to developed countries, with insufficient understanding of important dialects and social variants of some languages, and teaching and research are also very scarce ^[2]. Foreign language education in China basically refers to English education, since people instinctively assume that the foreign language is English. In Tibet which borders several countries, where the languages of South Asian countries are important, Tibet's education system still does not include them in their foreign language education.

In Tibetan foreign language education, whether basic or higher education, foreign language majors or public foreign languages, English occupies an absolute position ^[5]. For education and learning in other languages, students generally apply to various foreign language majors at colleges and universities. Some language enthusiasts or learners may also conduct self-study or join off-campus language training institutions to learn other languages. In the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, foreign language mainly referred to Russian.

2.5. Insufficient understanding of the importance of foreign language education

At national level, the most essential function of foreign languages is international communication. From a social perspective, before policies were implemented to reduce the homework burden on students in compulsory education and the burden of off-campus training, foreign language training institutions were numerous. Students' reasons for learning foreign languages were mostly passing the exams, pursuing further education, or going abroad. On a personal level, if there is no pressure in pursuing further education, passing exams, or going abroad, most people will not spend a lot of time learning a foreign language. In the end, whether it is the country, society, or individuals, there is insufficient understanding of the importance of foreign language education and learning, thus foreign language education and learning have not been emphasized and developed. As early as 1958, the United States included the requirements for foreign language education in the National Defense Education Act. The United States has long recognized that foreign languages are related to national security and actively encouraged its citizens to learn significant foreign languages, including Chinese.

3. Foreign language education policies in new China

Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, China's foreign language policy can be divided into four periods. Each period is related to one factor or multiple factors, such as China's politics, economy, and social development. The language policy must obey and serve the national political, economic, and cultural interests, and the purpose of the language policy is to achieve the national interests ^[6].

3.1. Russian language domination period (1949-1956)

China's foreign language policy has the direct nature of national decision-making and management, which can effectively reflect the national will and social development needs of different periods ^[7]. In the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, foreign language education mainly referred to Russian language education. At that time, China was poor and weak, and China needed to learn from the experience of the Soviet Union for its development. China had extensively learned from the experience of the Soviet Union in economy, politics, culture, and other fields. Therefore, Russian language was rapidly promoted and developed, while other languages including English, were ignored. In the early years of the founding of the People's Republic of China, in order to adapt to the development and needs of national politics and economy, and draw on the experience of the Soviet Union's development, the foreign language education plan at that time adopted a Russian-dominated policy of emphasizing Russian language education and downplaying English education ^[3]. The foreign language policy in the early years of the founding of New China was closely related to China's political environment and economic situation. The relationship between China and the Soviet Union was an important determining factor in foreign language education policy during this period.

3.2. Transformation and exploration period (1956-1966)

Starting from 1958, the relationship between China and the Soviet Union began to deteriorate, and the conflict

between the two sides reached its peak in 1969. In addition, China has established diplomatic relations with more and more countries, and the demand for other languages, especially English, is increasingly evident. During this time, the supply of Russian talents has exceeded the demand. In 1964, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council issued the “Outline of the Seven Year Plan for Foreign Language Education,” which modified foreign language education and put education in other languages on the agenda to meet the political and economic needs of the time. The “Outline of the Seven Year Plan for Foreign Language Education” reflected on the shortcomings of foreign language policies and plans. Therefore, China began to adjust the proportion of foreign languages offered in middle and higher education institutions, and determined that English was the first foreign language^[8].

3.3. Interruption period (1966-1978)

During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976, schools were closed and foreign language education was interrupted. During this period, policy measures related to the “Outline of the Seven Year Plan for Foreign Language Education” were put on hold. Foreign language education suffered serious damage between 1966 and 1977^[9]. The foreign language policy during this period is closely related to China’s political environment.

3.4. Development and improvement period (1978 to present)

After the reform and opening-up, the need for economic development and exchanges between China and other countries has promoted foreign language education to an equally important position as Chinese and mathematics, and a compulsory foreign language education system has been formed^[10]. In 1971, China regained its legitimate seat in the United Nations. In 1972, President Nixon of the United States visited China. In 1977, China resumed the college entrance examination. In 1978, China implemented reform and opening-up policy. In 1979, China and the United States established diplomatic relations, thus ending their isolation, and normalizing their relations. With the occurrence and development of these major events, foreign language education in China was dominated by English education, and Russian language no longer occupied the primary position. The reform and opening-up policy began in the late 1970s, and colleges resumed the college entrance examination. They began to recruit master’s students and doctoral students majoring in English, and English has replaced Russian as the first foreign language resulting from some measures taken at that time^[11]. The foreign language policy during this period is closely related to China’s political, economic, and social development. During this period, the demand for English greatly increased. After the reform and opening-up policy, China was eager to keep up with the pace of the world and the process of globalization, hence China has attached great importance to foreign languages especially English^[12].

The National Symposium on Foreign Language Education held in 1978 was the first conference organized by the Ministry of Education to study foreign language education planning since the founding of the People’s Republic of China, with a historic turning point^[3]. The “Several Opinions on Strengthening Foreign Language Education” is a document proposed and approved by the conference for distribution. This document has a strategic perspective in planning the language status of English and considering the layout of other common and non-common languages^[8].

The “College English Teaching Syllabus” issued in 1986 clearly stipulated that the purpose of college English teaching was to cultivate strong reading skills, intermediate listening skills (and translation skills for science and engineering syllabus), preliminary writing skills, and speaking skills. This helps students to use English as a tool to obtain the information required for their majors, and to lay a good foundation for further improving their English proficiency. From this syllabus, it can be seen that the requirements for college

English proficiency were not very high at that time, the main aim was to cultivate strong reading skills, while the requirements for oral and writing skills were only preliminary. This syllabus only considered English as a tool to acquire the necessary knowledge for the profession. There were few direct exchanges between Chinese society and the international community, Chinese scientific and technological personnel mainly relied on literature to understand the development of foreign technology. The requirements for listening and speaking skills were relatively small, and most people did not use the foreign languages they learned after graduation, hence the skills proposed in the syllabus were appropriate^[13]. However, the understanding of the importance of English in this outline is still insufficient to some extent, and it has not elevated English to the level of serving national security and stability.

The revised “College English Teaching Syllabus” in 1999 stipulated that the purpose of college English teaching was to cultivate students’ strong reading ability and intermediate listening, speaking, writing, and translation skills, so that they could exchange information in English. College English teaching should help students to lay a solid language foundation, master good language learning methods, improve cultural literacy, and adapt to the needs of social and economic development. The revised “College English Teaching Syllabus” required students to improve their overall English proficiency, as well as to master language learning methods and improve their personal cultural literacy through learning English. It is believed that economic and social development requires English, and English has been elevated to the national level.

On October 31, 2000, the 18th meeting of the Standing Committee of the Ninth National People’s Congress revised and passed the “Law of the People’s Republic of China on National Common Languages and Writing System.” This law was formulated in accordance with the Constitution, mainly to promote the standardization and development of the national common language, namely Mandarin and standardized Chinese characters. As the supreme code of language policy, although there were four articles concerning foreign languages, they all stipulated that the use of foreign languages in China must be premised on the first use of the national common language^[14]. Based on this, the position of Mandarin in China was firm. Ensuring the stable position of Mandarin is a priority in China, thus the position of foreign languages in China could not be higher than that of Mandarin. Foreign languages could only be subordinate to Mandarin.

In 2004, the Ministry of Education issued the “Teaching Requirements for College English Curriculum (Trial)”. It included the reform of college English teaching, dividing English proficiency into three levels, each of which had detailed requirements for recommended vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation skills. The goal of college English teaching was to cultivate students’ comprehensive English application skills, especially their listening and speaking skills, so that they could effectively use English in oral and written information exchange in future work and social interactions. At the same time, it can enhance students’ self-learning and improve their comprehensive cultural literacy to meet the needs of China’s social development and international communication. The teaching objectives specifically mentioned the need to cultivate students’ listening and speaking skills, which demonstrates that China recognized that students’ listening and speaking skills were indeed relatively weak. However, the overall English listening and speaking skills have not improved significantly. English has become the international language, thus English is required to meet the needs of international communication. During this period, China still did not link foreign language education with national security, and the highest demand for foreign languages was only to meet international exchanges.

In September 2015, the Ministry of Education issued the “Implementation Opinions on Strengthening the Training of Non-Common Foreign Language Talents,” which proposed to accelerate the cultivation of urgently needed non-common language talents in the country, and deepen the reform of undergraduate education and teaching in non-common language majors. Non-common languages have become the urgently needed languages

of the country. China urgently needed to cultivate non-common language talents so that they can serve the global infrastructure development initiative. With the development proposal, foreign language colleges and universities across the country have set up language majors or courses related to the languages in the countries involved in the initiative, which has sparked a wave of learning minority languages since 2015 ^[15].

In 2016, the Ministry of Education and the National Language Commission issued the “13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of National Language and Writing System.” This document emphasized on strengthening international communication and dissemination of language and culture, actively cooperating with the implementation of the diplomatic strategy of major countries with Chinese characteristics, and adapting to the needs of the global infrastructure development initiative. It also included improving cultural exchange mechanism between China and foreign countries, strengthening language and cultural exchanges and cooperation with key countries, and opening-up multi-level channels for language and cultural exchanges. Foreign language as a tool for international communication, has become increasingly important, indicating that foreign language education played an increasingly important role. China has gradually shifted from using foreign languages as a means of learning advanced Western scientific and technological knowledge, to using foreign languages for international communication and cooperation. The internationalization of foreign language education was in progress.

In January 2018, the Ministry of Education issued the “National Standards for Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Majors in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions (Foreign Languages and Literature).” This document focused on improving foreign language majors’ application of foreign language.

In April 2018, the Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission released the “China English Proficiency Scale,” which was the first English proficiency standard for Chinese students. This scale was oriented towards language application, indicating that foreign language education in China placed greater emphasis on the ability in language application.

In August 2018, the Ministry of Education, the Ministry of Finance, and the National Development and Reform Commission issued the “Guiding Opinions on Accelerating the Construction of ‘Double First-Class’ in Higher Education Institutions.” This document proposed to increase the training of bilingual or multilingual composite international professional talents. This indicated that China has gradually realized the important role of this type of professional talents. China has been consciously cultivating such talents in order for them to serve national and regional strategies and construction. Cultivating this sort of professional talents meant placing higher demands on higher education institutions, and universities needed to actively reform foreign language education.

In April 2020, the Teaching Guidance Committee for Foreign Language and Literature Majors in Higher Education Institutions of the Ministry of Education issued the “Teaching Guidelines for Undergraduate Foreign Language and Literature Majors in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions.” This document had three parts, namely “Teaching Guide for English Majors,” “Teaching Guide for Translation Majors,” and “Teaching Guide for Business English Majors.” The characteristics of this document were to encourage excellent classification and distinctive development, emphasize interdisciplinary and composite integration, and advocate innovative ideas and diverse methods. It also includes to emphasize classic reading and good personality, provide reference and basis for the cultivation of innovative talents in English majors nationwide, deepen professional reform, and promote classroom revolution.

Overall, as of now, the main goal of foreign language education in China is to cultivate talents with foreign language skills to meet the development needs of various fields such as politics, economy, culture, etc., with the highest goal of serving international exchanges. Compared with the US foreign language policy that values

national security, China's foreign language policy should be elevated to the level of national security strategy, and the status of foreign languages should be raised in relevant legislation, so that foreign languages can be used to protect China's security and economic interests.

4. Development of foreign language education

4.1. Optimizing foreign language teaching methods to improve the quality of foreign language education

English teachers must have a correct understanding of the drawbacks of traditional teaching methods, actively seek reform, and constantly update and optimize teaching methods and models ^[16]. In addition to using traditional teacher-centered teaching methods, English teachers should also try to adopt student-centered teaching methods to provide students with more opportunities to express themselves and improve their abilities in foreign language application. English teachers should actively learn and use foreign teaching methods. Teaching methods, such as situational teaching method, communicative teaching method, task-based teaching method, associative teaching method, and group teaching method, are all good language teaching methods.

In the classroom, English teachers should not only explain the content of textbooks, but also integrate the culture of English-speaking countries into the teaching content. By connecting with reality, students' feelings and memories can be profound.

4.2. Increasing the number of important languages and raising awareness of the importance of foreign language education and policies

The foreign language proficiency of a country is related to national security, development, and image. The lack of foreign language proficiency will weaken a country's cross-cultural communication and business competitiveness, posing a threat to its non-traditional national security ^[17]. As an international lingua franca, English is one of the most important languages in the world today. English is significant in economic globalization. English plays an important role in various fields such as economy, politics, culture, technology, national defense, and security. In addition to continuing to invest in English education, China should also focus on establishing and investing in important languages and other languages, and implementing multilingual education policies. Important languages and other languages, play an essential role in various fields, especially in the areas of economy and national security, and their importance is self-evident. Foreign language policy and planning research is not purely academic research but closely related to the country's political, economic, military, and diplomatic development, and China's foreign language macro strategy should be coordinated from the perspective of national security and long-term development, which are the ultimate interests ^[18].

The number of languages and scale of China's foreign language education are relatively small, and the number of languages is far from enough to ensure the economic and information security of various fields in the country ^[19]. China should establish languages such as Russian, Japanese, Korean, Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, Italian, Latin, Arabic, Hindi, Nepali, Bhutanese, Turkish, Urdu, Thai, Vietnamese, Burmese, Lao, Indonesian, Malay, Filipino, and Latin as important languages. At the same time, the teaching and learning of other languages should also be valued. The foreign language education policy with extremely high English proficiency in Dutch is worth learning from. Dutch students need to learn three foreign languages in the first stage of secondary education, namely English, German, and French ^[20]. All parts of China should choose one or two more languages to teach as second and third foreign languages in junior and senior high schools according to regional characteristics, and continue to offer second and third foreign language courses in universities to form a coherent and systematic learning of the second and third foreign languages. Regions with better

conditions can start to offer courses in first, second and third foreign languages in primary school. Being exposed to foreign languages from a young age is beneficial for foreign language learning. The “Curriculum Objectives for Primary and Secondary School Learning in the United States” emphasizes the importance of early childhood development in foreign language learning and supports the encouragement of young children in learning a second language as early as possible ^[21].

Foreign language policy is closely related to national security, but China’s foreign language policy has almost no clear national security goals ^[22]. The Chinese government, education departments, educational institutions, students, and other Chinese people should recognize the importance of foreign language education in relation to national security. The nation and education authorities should incorporate the learning and education of English, important languages, and other languages into relevant national laws and regulations, and elevate foreign language policies to the level of national security. They should also increase legislative guarantees and funding for foreign language education, and ensure the effective implementation of foreign language policies. Educational institutions should adjust their training programs for foreign language education in a timely manner in accordance with foreign language policies to ensure the quality of foreign language education. At the individual level, one should strive to learn foreign languages and link them with the fate of the country, rather than just learning them for exams or graduation.

5. Conclusion

The number of people learning foreign language in China is massive, and there is still room for improvement in the quality of foreign language education. The teaching methods of foreign language education are relatively traditional and few, and the number of foreign languages is relatively small. To some extent, foreign languages have not received sufficient attention in China, and China has not yet recognized the importance of foreign language education and policies in various fields. In foreign language education, China still needs to increase the number of foreign languages, optimize the teaching methods, and improve the quality of foreign language education. China’s foreign language education policy is closely related to various fields such as politics, economy, and social development in China. Foreign language education policies are indeed closely related to national security issues, and should start from the overall situation, and align and comply with national strategies ^[5]. The cause of foreign language education is related to national security. Foreign languages are significant for protecting and promoting the country, and maintaining world peace and stability. Therefore, the formulation of China’s foreign language policy should be elevated to the level of national security strategy, and long-term plans and efforts should be made to improve China’s foreign language skills.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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