

Retrospective and Prospective Analysis of Chinese Foreign Language Education Policies (1949-2018)

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Abstract: With the deepening of globalization, foreign language proficiency has gradually become an indispensable skill for individuals. Foreign language education policies have also evolved in tandem with societal development. In China, early foreign language education primarily served the nation's international communication and cooperation needs, meeting the demands of economic and trade collaboration. With the deepening of reform and opening-up, foreign language education policies have continuously improved, and the reasons for individuals learning foreign languages have shifted from serving the nation to enhancing personal capabilities, ultimately contributing to the country. This paper explores the relationship between Chinese foreign language education policies and societal development. Using a literature review approach, it retrospectively examines the development of policies from 1949 to 2018, summarizes factors influencing foreign language education policy development, and analyzes how policies respond to changes in societal demands, contributing to China's societal development. The paper also provides prospects for policy development to adapt to evolving societal needs. In conclusion, the paper asserts that updating foreign language education policies requires not only keeping pace with economic developments but also demands a deeper focus on enhancing disciplinary content, optimizing educational resource allocation, and innovating educational approaches to comprehensively optimize foreign language education policies.

1. Introduction

The interaction between China's foreign language education policies and societal development has a longstanding history, with research in this area tracing back to the evolution of policies since 1949 and how they have adapted to diverse societal needs across different periods, encompassing economic, cultural, and international communication aspects.

This paper aims to explore the relationship between Chinese foreign language education policies and societal development. Through a retrospective analysis of the evolution of foreign language education policies from 1949 to 2018, it presents various factors influencing policy formulation during each period. The paper examines the efforts made by policies to accommodate changes in

societal demands, contributing significantly to China's societal development. Additionally, the paper provides a forward-looking perspective on future policy development to better align with the continuously evolving societal needs.

Analyzing foreign language education policies allows for the provision of recommendations to enhance the foreign language education system, ensuring that students possess language skills adaptable to future societal requirements. Furthermore, researching foreign language education policies contributes to understanding China's role in the international community, particularly the contribution of foreign language proficiency to international cooperation and cultural exchange, thereby fostering global collaboration and cultural understanding. Moreover, the study of foreign language education policies can uncover the significance of language skills in employment opportunities and economic competitiveness, thereby contributing to the enhancement of the country's economic prowess. Lastly, by envisioning future policy development, this paper aims to offer strategic recommendations to the government and educational institutions on adapting to the ever-changing societal demands.

2. Reform Phases of China's Foreign Language Education Policy and Characteristics of Each Phase

2.1. Exploration Phase during the Early Years of the People's Republic of China

2.1.1. Initial Period of the People's Republic of China (1949-1965)

Upon the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, there was a clear emphasis on raising the cultural level of the people and cultivating talents for national development in the *Common Program of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference*. The education system of the People's Republic of China was designated as New Democratic Education, emphasizing national, scientific, and mass cultural education. The program mandated the initial reform of existing school education, including the addition of ideological education courses, the reform of teaching materials, and the eradication of servile, feudal, and fascist ideologies.

In the early years of the People's Republic, Western countries imposed a blockade on China, leading to China's alliance with the Soviet Union. Besides economic assistance, China sought expertise from Soviet educators, and numerous individuals were sent to the Soviet Union for educational purposes. A fervour for learning the Russian language emerged domestically as China closely associated itself with Soviet education [1]. With the signing of the *Sino-Soviet Treaty of Friendship, Alliance, and Mutual Assistance*, China and the Soviet Union strengthened their ties, incorporating Soviet textbooks as models in educational policy reforms. Additionally, there was an ideological inclination towards the Soviet Union, as stated in *On Specializing in People's Democracy*: "The Communist Party of the Soviet Union is our best teacher, and we must learn from them" [2]. In response to political needs, there was a demand to cultivate Russian language talent, leading to the establishment of Russian language majors in many universities. Surprisingly, due to the societal trend towards learning Russian, there were instances where students showed reluctance to study English [1].

2.1.2. Cultural Revolution Period (1966-1976)

During the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1969, education became a focal point for revolutionary changes, resulting in a comprehensive halt to educational development. The abolishment of the college entrance examination system severely impacted educational quality. Students lost opportunities for further education, and the widespread advocacy of the "useless to read"

movement drowned out foreign language learning and dissemination. English, as a foreign language course, disappeared from the curriculum. It was not until 1969 that there was a slight shift in this situation, with the introduction of newly compiled English textbooks. However, given the overall stagnation in educational development at the time, these textbooks did not effectively serve the learning needs. The English presented in the textbooks was not practical English but rather a Chinese-styled version, devoid of language theory, providing little assistance to the development of foreign language education [3]. The ten years of the Cultural Revolution marked a severe decline in English education and, more broadly, foreign language education. It was a decade of hardship for foreign language education, leading to a significant shortage of English language talents in the post-Cultural Revolution era [4].

2.2. Reform and Opening-Up Phase

2.2.1. Early Period of Reform and Opening-Up (1977-1991)

With the restoration of the college entrance examination system in 1977, the Ministry of Education aimed to break the closed educational pattern imposed during the Cultural Revolution, emphasizing the reconstruction and reform of the education system. The adjustment of the allocation of educational resources and the incorporation of foreign educational experiences played a crucial role in cultivating diverse talents. English and mathematics were among the first subjects to be widely promoted nationwide [5]. The National Symposium on Foreign Language Education in 1978 marked the first major conference outlining the development direction for foreign language education since the Cultural Revolution. Foreign languages were designated as compulsory subjects in college entrance exams, and the fourth set of high school English textbooks was issued [3]. The new textbooks highlighted the cultivation of students' language application abilities, departing from the previous emphasis on rote memorization in English education. Subsequently, the field of English education continuously explored teaching methods and models unique to English instruction. By the 1980s, various innovative foreign language teaching methods were boldly attempted domestically, utilizing different teaching tools for engaging lessons, leading to improvements in students' listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills to varying degrees.

2.2.2. Advanced Period of Reform and Opening-Up (1992-2002)

In the mid-1980s, there was a significant transformation in foreign language education compared to the early stages of reform and opening-up. The organization of the 1985 China English Teaching Symposium and the International Conference on English Teaching, jointly hosted by Guangzhou, promoted research on Chinese English teaching methods and the reform of English teaching systems. Additionally, the nationwide implementation of the College English Test (CET) levels four and six in the late 1980s significantly propelled the development of English education and improved the quality of English instruction. By the 1990s, English had become an integral part of people's lives, with individuals from elementary school to doctoral programs requiring a certain level of English proficiency. English exams became an indispensable component of all academic entrance examinations, sparking a nationwide enthusiasm for learning English [3].

2.3. New Era Phase in the 21st Century

2.3.1. Establishment and Implementation Period of Policies Promoting Educational Equity (2003-2011)

Since the 8th National Basic Education Curriculum Reform in 2001, the English curriculum in

primary schools has progressively advanced, starting from the third grade. After demonstrating positive outcomes, the new curriculum for the nine-year compulsory education was fully implemented in 2005. Moreover, as China became more open to the world, especially after joining the World Trade Organization, there was a growing demand in society for foreign language talents, leading to an increased emphasis on improving the quality of foreign language teaching in schools. To adapt to the new era of national educational development, comprehensive reforms in teaching were undertaken to enhance the quality of education and meet the talent demands of the new era, marking the primary development direction of the new century.

2.3.2. Period of Educational Opening-Up in the New Era (2012-2018)

With the convening of the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, every aspect of national work began to focus more on internal development, pushing educational opening-up to a new level. The initiation of the "Belt and Road" marked a deeper cultural exchange between China and foreign countries, contributing China's strength to the construction of a community with a shared future for humanity [6]. As an important tool for international communication and collaboration, foreign languages became a crucial aspect of constructing a specialized, systematic, and globalized foreign language education policy after the 18th National Congress. In this context, the nation emphasized the work carried out by foreign language departments at different levels and types, as well as the contributions of experts to the formulation of foreign language education policies. The Congress emphasized effective language allocation, coordination of foreign language teaching at different stages such as primary school, middle school, and university, and the revision of high-level compound foreign language talent training plans.

After the Ministry of Education revised the "General High School English Curriculum Standards" in 2017, it explicitly outlined the fundamental educational philosophy for high school English teaching. This revision reflected the basic policies of China's foreign language education. First, it emphasized the development of core literacy in the English subject with the fundamental goal of nurturing virtue and talent. Second, it aimed to cultivate students' language abilities and cultural identity, fostering an appreciation for both Chinese and foreign cultures while maintaining a sense of Chinese cultural sentiment, promoting cultural confidence, and expanding cultural perspectives [4].

3. Factors Influencing the Formulation of Foreign Language Education Policies

3.1. Economic Factors

The economic value of foreign languages is evident in their utility for direct economic and cultural activities across different countries. Studies indicate that, for the majority of people, proficiency in English may not directly impact income levels. However, for specific foreign language professions, there is a significant correlation between language proficiency and income. In essence, as language proficiency improves, income tends to increase. This confirms that language skills and specialization enhance the value of human capital, demonstrating the economic value of foreign languages in society [7]. Therefore, in the formulation and reform of foreign language education policies, English is often placed at the center, emphasizing its indispensability as a language tool. The policies revolve around studying language as a social and public resource, aiming to optimize foreign language education policies while maximizing the economic benefits of foreign languages in economic development [8].

3.2. Talent Demand

During the early years of the People's Republic of China, due to the blockade imposed by Western

countries, China formed an alliance with the Soviet Union. In this initial phase, China faced material shortages and needed reconstruction and restructuring nationwide. Besides economic development, China relied on Soviet assistance in the field of education. With deepening ties with the Soviet Union, there was an increasing demand for Russian language talents in China [1]. Before the founding of the People's Republic, only 13 universities in China offered Russian language majors. In response to the growing demand for Russian language talents, the Ministry of Education made the decision to suspend the English departments of normal colleges in 1953. In 1954, it stipulated that secondary schools should not offer foreign language courses, and the foreign language education policy at the high school level primarily focused on Russian language courses to meet China's demand for Russian language talents.

In the 1960s, as relations with the Soviet Union deteriorated, there was a decreasing need for Russian language talents in society. Many students and workers with Russian language specialties found themselves unemployed. Simultaneously, China's relations with Western countries improved, and more connections were established. English-centric foreign language education started to become standardized. The establishment of the Foreign Language Planning Group in 1964 highlighted the importance of foreign language education, giving it due attention. The seven-year plan proposed by the Foreign Language Planning Group reviewed and critiqued the experiences and lessons of foreign language education policies since the founding of the People's Republic. It reflected on the previous neglect of foreign language education and outlined a planning policy with English as the primary focus [1]. Although the seven-year plan was terminated with the arrival of the Cultural Revolution, its influence on the subsequent training of English talents was significant.

3.3. Cultural Exchange

Before the 1970s, China's close alliance with the Soviet Union led to intense cultural exchange with the Soviet Union. During this period, foreign language education mainly focused on Russian, encouraging people to communicate and interact in Russian to cultivate Russian language talents and enhance cultural exchange with the Soviet Union. In the 1970s, as cultural exchanges between China and the United States, Japan, and other countries increased, the focus of cultural exchange, economic trade, academic training, and other aspects gradually shifted towards Europe and America. Foreign language education, centered on English, was implemented nationwide. The shift in the focus of cultural exchange directly influenced the changes in China's foreign language education policies. In the recruitment of foreign language majors in universities, besides English, Japanese majors were introduced to meet and promote the demand for cultural exchange with different countries. Additionally, Japanese language education was incorporated into foreign language education [1].

4. Recommendations

4.1. Innovation in Foreign Language Education Policies

Given China's vast territory and large population, the capabilities and levels of foreign language education vary across regions, with different sectors having diverse requirements for foreign languages [9]. Therefore, foreign language education policy standards cannot be entirely uniform. They should be set at relatively multiple and progressively advancing levels. For example, in entrance examinations, foreign language exams should not be uniformly applied to urban and rural students. Educational resources in rural areas are relatively scarce, and opportunities for learning foreign languages are limited. Therefore, applying uniform standards for foreign language exams would disadvantage rural students [10]. Different standards for foreign language exams can be established to further promote educational equity. Furthermore, foreign language education should not be limited

to English. Multiple language education models, such as Russian and Japanese, can be introduced. With the increasing demand for foreign language talents in society, beyond English, the demand for other foreign languages is also growing. Introducing different foreign languages not only helps students find languages they are more interested in learning but also enhances their academic communication skills. Therefore, innovating foreign language education policies for different languages can better meet the overall societal demand for foreign languages, contributing to economic and educational progress.

4.2. Diversification of Foreign Language Education

As globalization continues to develop, the world becomes increasingly diverse. Fusion and communication between different races, languages, and cultures are common in today's world [7]. Current Chinese foreign language education primarily emphasizes the learning of foreign languages and cultures, leading many students to embrace Western culture while neglecting their own. This continuous erosion of their mother tongue culture could potentially lead to the extinction of indigenous cultures. Therefore, correct educational ideologies and values should be established in foreign language education policies. Policies should actively advocate for the cultivation of cultural literacy. Foreign language education should be based on the culture of the Chinese nation, guiding and cultivating students' multicultural identity and their identification with their own ethnic culture in the classroom, promoting the development of foreign language education towards cultural diversification [11]. Additionally, the training of foreign language teachers should move towards diversification. Schools or education departments need to increase training opportunities for foreign language teachers, such as overseas exchanges and regular teaching research meetings. This will broaden teaching methods, thereby promoting the professional development of foreign language teachers [12].

4.3. Development of Composite Language Talent

As globalization deepens, integrating into the global economic integration seems inevitable in today's society. However, participation in international economic and trade activities requires more composite talents. Therefore, the cultivation of composite language talents is indispensable. Universities need to cultivate not only talents proficient in foreign languages but also professionals with expertise in other fields (e.g., economics, finance). This will meet the diverse needs of society [10]. Therefore, foreign language education policies need to adapt to the country's development needs. China's continuous collaboration with countries worldwide implies an increasing demand for talents in international finance, trade, and other fields. Establishing interdisciplinary language disciplines that adapt to societal and market needs is an aspect that universities need to prioritize.

5. Conclusions

In reviewing the evolution of China's foreign language policy over the past 70 years, the author acknowledges both commendable aspects and areas that require continuous effort. The reform of foreign language education policies has not only made a significant contribution to China's economic trade, international exchanges, and cultural development but has also become imperative with the deepening of reform and opening up.

This transformation provides robust support for China's integration into the global system and the broadening of its international perspective. Foreign language education is not merely a subject but a bridge connecting China with the world, fostering cultural exchange and understanding internationally. In this process, the guiding role of policies cannot be ignored. Through the

formulation of flexible and forward-looking policies, China has laid a solid foundation for cultivating internationally competitive talents.

However, as global economic integration continues to deepen, foreign language education policies need to keep pace with the times and align with economic development. In the wave of globalization, the importance of language exchange extends beyond English to include more languages. Therefore, there is a continuous need to adjust the pace of foreign language education policies, promote the diversification of language education, and cultivate talents with proficiency in multiple languages to better adapt to the diverse demands of the international community.

The updating of foreign language education policies not only requires keeping up with economic trends but also demands a deeper focus on enhancing disciplinary content, optimizing the allocation of educational resources, and innovating educational methods. Only through such comprehensive upgrades can foreign language education fully unleash its maximum potential in China's social development. It can contribute significantly to nurturing more internationally competitive talents for the country, allowing China to present a more prominent image on the world stage.

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