

# *On the Brexit of the UK and Its Language-in-Education Policies*

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**Abstract:** The Brexit of the UK will have profound impact on politics, economy, culture and education of the UK, EU and even the whole world. The UK has implemented its language-in-education policies for many years, which plays an important role in enhancing national language competence. In order to serve the national development at the world stage, the UK has been keeping designing its language-in-education policies, such as choosing major foreign languages for the future, reserving foreign language talents to enhance its national foreign language competence, and strengthening the important role of modern foreign language in the National Curriculum-. The Brexit will also influence language-in-education policies of the UK. By studying and interpreting the policy documents of the UK government, the language-in-education policies of some institutions for language policy and planning and its post-Brexit language policies may give us some implications in terms of language policy and planning.

## **1. Introduction**

Brexit, a historical decision in the UK history, will have a profound impact on the politics, economy, culture, and education, etc. of the UK, EU and even the whole world. Language is an important part of human society. In order to make the most of the strategic function of language, “Any human speech community is carrying out some kind of language policies. (Dai Manchun, 2018) [1]” The Brexit will also have some impacts on the language policy and planning of the UK as well as the EU. This paper is mainly on the language-in-education policies of the UK, impacts of the Brexit on foreign language education of the UK, and the implications for the foreign language education of China.

## **2. Language Policies of the UK**

Baldauf (2005) [2] classified language planning into four categories, which are status planning, corpus planning, language-in-education, and prestige planning. Language-in-education is an important part of the language policy and planning and has become a research focus of language policy and planning of many other countries. Li Yan (2018) [3] cited the points of Profess Li Wei in one lecture, “The UK realized the functions of language functioning through policies in education. There are no language policy and planning in the UK, but there are language-in-education policies.”

There are no unified language policy and planning on the national level, just like Xie Qian (2015) [4] pointed out “UK is among very few countries in the EU which doesn’t implement compulsory foreign language education”. We can also get some implications for the foreign language education in China by studying and interpreting the policy documents of the UK government, the language-in-education policies of some institutions for language policy and planning and its post-Brexit language policies.

### **3. Language Education in English Secondary Schools**

#### **3.1. History and Status Quo**

For many historical and modern reasons, the components of pupils in English secondary schools are heterogeneous. The number of pupils whose native languages is non-English is increasing. In the National Curriculum (1989), a foreign language was a compulsory course for pupils before the age of 16. From then on, the foreign language education has carried out in the UK for almost 30 years. However, the national competence of foreign language of the UK is in the last place in the Europe according to a newest survey (Burge et al. 2013). [5]

At present, English is the second language in most non-English speaking countries, because English is considered as a lingua franca. However, the UK has not regulated which language should be the priority foreign language. Because of historical reasons, French has been Britain’s first language, which is the most widely studied foreign language. However, in the recent 20 years, the situation has changed. Spanish has gained increasing popularity in the UK, while French and German are on the decline in terms of the number of learners. At the same time, the British are also learning and making the use of other foreign languages, such as Chinese, Arabic Italian, etc. The major reason is that the British people don’t need to choose a specified foreign language to learn due to economic or social reasons and the British government is also reluctant to impose one single foreign language in their educational system. Li Yan (2018) [3] cited the points of Professor Li Wei with University of London about Britons’ attitude to foreign language, “many white people from the working class have prejudice against foreign people and their languages. Although the British government allocated funds for foreign language education, there are still many Britons who hold that it’s useless to learn foreign languages and many Britons are very sensitive to cultural transition via language teaching.”

Britain is rich in language resources, and it has carried out multilingual foreign language education for many years. But to learn which languages is a real challenge for Britain. The British Council (2014) [6] released a research report entitled Languages for the Future. Which Languages the UK Needs Most and Why. It used a list of criteria to choose the ten languages that would best serve ‘the UK’s prosperity, security and influence in the world in the years ahead’. The languages identified, in rank order of importance, were: Spanish, Arabic, French, Mandarin Chinese, German, Portuguese, Italian, Russian, Turkish and Japanese.

#### **3.2. Language-in-Education**

As there are no unified language policy and planning on the national level. But as to foreign language education, there are relative descriptions and regulations in the National Curriculum. From 2002, the UK began to implement the 2002 National Languages Strategy. The core purpose was to boost foreign language teaching in English secondary schools and improve the pupils’ competence of foreign languages. National Curriculum (2011) made it clear that modern foreign languages should be a foundation subject at Key Stages 2-4. Since 1988, the National Curriculum has been

organized through four key stages. The UK national curriculum divides the primary and secondary school stages into four Key Stages. The first Key Stage consists of the first and second grades (students aged 5-7 years old). The second Key Stage consists of grades 3 to 6 (students are 7 to 11 years old); The third Key Stage consists of grades 7 to 9 (students are 11-14 years old); The fourth Key Stage consists of the eleventh grade (students aged 14-16).

The Curriculum also mentioned that “it is worth noting at this point that the optimum age at which to introduce modern foreign language teaching remains a contested matter that requires careful consideration of evidence; this is not yet fully resolved and we therefore present modern foreign languages in lower Key Stage.” There are new elaborations about foreign language education in the National Curriculum (2014).

The purposes of this Curriculum for foreign language education are elaborated as follows:

The first is to ensure that all students improve their spoken and written English by learning authentic foreign language materials. The second is to ensure that all students have fluent oral expression, diversified communication methods and accurate pronunciation and intonation. The third is to ensure that all students have a good command of written expression.

Compared to previous versions of the National Curriculum, there are some new regulations about the Key Stages and ages of pupils to take the foreign language subject. Pupils are only required to take modern foreign languages as the compulsory courses in Key Stage 2 and Key Stage 3. Pupils in Key Stage 4 are not required to study foreign languages, that is to say that pupils above 14 may not study modern foreign languages.

### **3.3. The Crisis of Foreign Language Competence**

In recent years, some British media and researchers have discussed about the decline of foreign language competence of the Britons. For example, on the website of TES on November 22, 2002, there was a new report entitled Language Learning on the Brink of Crisis. TES poll raises prospect of thousands of pupils dropping French and German as Government makes them optional. More than half of England’s secondary schools are poised to end compulsory languages from the age of 14 as a result of plans to change the law. However, up to this day, only 50% of students aged 15-16 would like to choose the subject of modern foreign language when they sit the GCSE (General Certificate of Secondary Education). This proportion of students who take this subject has fallen significantly compared to the rate of 76% in 2002. We can see that the policies of the UK government have negative effects on students’ choice of a foreign language as a subject to sit GCSE at Key Stage 4.

This phenomenon also affected the foreign language teaching in some institutions of higher education and even interfered with the overall language competence of the Britons. There was a news report entitled Why is UK language teaching in crisis, which pointed out that policy changes and lower funding were the major reasons for this crisis.

## **4. The Brexit and its Language-in-Education**

### **4.1. The Potential Effects of the Brexit**

Under the background of the Brexit, many nationalists in the UK had appealed that the British should speak English in public and many signs with other languages had been destroyed, which had embodied the language identity of many Britons. The Brexit may also send a signal to many British parents and students that since the UK will leave the EU in the near future, so the foreign languages of EU member countries may not be very important. Pupils may not be very active to learn these

foreign languages after the Brexit. For example, some media reported that some students sighed with a relief after the Brexit referendum, for French learning might not bother them any longer. In the meanwhile, secondary schools may encounter more difficulties to promote the foreign languages courses in the future.

British students have enjoyed exceptional advantages in language because their native language is the most popular one all over the world, which may facilitate their success on the world stage in terms of politics, economy and culture, etc. However, some researchers in the UK also recognized the significance of language competence toward the Post-Brexit UK. Tinsley and Board (2017) [7] pointed out that “Many teachers are working extremely hard to improve standards and recruitment to language courses in their schools, and would welcome concerted action on an increased scale in order to ensure that the many positive aspirations in current government policy are successfully implemented.”

#### 4.2. Shortage of Language Teachers

The Conservative Party had successfully been reelected to take their office on May 7, 2015. The government also updated its education policies in the Conservative Manifesto 2015. As we all know, education is very important for improving people’s knowledge and skills, and the effects may be the most obvious. Since 2010, the British government has gradually introduced the English Baccalaureate (EBacc), which is a standard measure of student performance in public schools. The English Baccalaureate (EBacc) attaches great importance to students’ academic performance in these core subjects, which include a set of core subjects at GCSE level that keeps young people’s options open for further study and future careers. The EBacc is English language and literature; maths; the sciences; geography or history and a language. The Conservative Manifesto 2015 declared that all the students who wanted to attend GCSE had to sign for these core subjects. The government’s ambition is to see 75% of pupils studying the EBacc subject combination at GCSE by 2022, and 90% by 2025. A foreign language is among these five core subjects, which reflects the UK government’s emphasis on the ability of students to speak a foreign language.

However, the UK will face shortage of foreign language teachers to meet the goal of 90 per cent of secondary school students learning a foreign language. To solve this problem, in addition to training its own foreign language teachers, Britain adopts the method of recruiting foreign teachers directly from abroad to make up for the shortage of foreign language teachers. These foreign teachers are mainly from France, Spain and other European countries. One of the reasons why they are willing to work and live in the UK is the EU membership of the UK, which can bring a lot of convenience to their work and life.

It goes without saying that the Brexit from the European Union would adversely affect the country’s already short supply of foreign language teachers. First, the support of EU for the training of foreign language teachers in the UK is likely to decrease, and the number of foreign language teachers from this source will have to be reduced. Secondly, foreign language teachers in other EU member states who work and live in the UK may also face the choice of continuing to teach in the UK or returning to their home nations or working in other EU member states, because their future working and living environment is facing many uncertainties. If they are not satisfied with the policies adopted by the UK, the UK will also face the possibility of losing their foreign language teachers, both of which will have a negative impact on the supply of foreign language teachers in the UK.

## 5. Outlook on Language-in-Education Post-Brexit

Brexit will have a profound impact on the language environment and language policy of the United Kingdom. In order to improve its foreign language ability, the British government should plan from the overall national level.

Firstly, the UK should reserve foreign language talents as soon as possible. On the one hand, it should try to retain foreign language talents from other EU member states who are now working in the UK. Policies should be made to treat these EU citizens who live and work in the UK properly, because the UK needs their language skills and there are not enough British people to be qualified for these jobs. Without these foreign teachers, Britain's foreign language education could be on the verge of collapse. In order to ensure the supply of foreign language teachers in the UK, the British government may formulate corresponding policies to retain these foreign language teachers from the EU. We will wait and see the specific policy measures. On the other hand, the UK needs to develop its language strategy to cultivate a large number of native foreign language talents as soon as possible, so as to cope with the overall development goals of the post-Brexit. These foreign language talents can reserve talents for future foreign language training. At the same time, the improvement of their foreign language skills will also provide more possibilities for their future career development.

Secondly, both the government and schools should make corresponding language policies. British schools enjoy relatively high autonomy in foreign language education, so primary and secondary schools should provide more foreign language programs for students to choose from. At the same time, the government should also provide financial and policy support for the foreign language education in English secondary schools. Mark Carney, governor of the Bank of England, has suggested the UK needs concerted action at the national level to ensure more young graduates to be able to speak at least one foreign language and become familiar with other cultures. Holmes (2018) [8] talked about the importance of language competence, he pointed out that "We can agree that at a time of uncertainty economically, a country's greatest and most reliable asset is its people. It stands to reason that building a prosperous Britain post-Brexit will depend on capitalizing on the knowledge and skills of the labor market, including its ability to speak multiple languages and understand diverse cultures." The British Council (2015) [9] shows that the relationship between skills development and international activity is perhaps clearest in terms of language learning; a lack of intercultural awareness and foreign language skills are a barrier to companies conducting business abroad.

Thirdly, the role of English language will also face some negative effects in EU. On the other hand, resistance to English is growing in many places in Europe. According to The Guardian, President Jean-claude Juncker described Britain's decision to leave European Union as "a tragedy", adding that English was losing its importance in Europe. Because of Brexit, the number of British people in Europe may be reduced, the influence of Standard English they speak will be reduced, and the English used within the EU will deviate from standard British English, which is bound to affect the promotion and spread of Standard British English in Europe.

According to the Brexit timetable, the UK will formally leave the EU in March 2019. It remains to be seen whether English will remain the main working language of the EU after Brexit. The first possibility is that the EU has every reason to remove English from its main working language, since the main user of this language is Britons. The second possibility is that it is entirely possible for the EU to retain the status of English as the main working language, given that it is the most widely spoken first language in the world. However, with the Brexit, British people, as the largest group of British English users, will have less influence in Europe, and British English will have less

influence in the EU. The English used within the EU will also change, which may accelerate the progress of the principle and idiomatic Standard English in the EU.

## 6. Implications for Language-in-Education Policy in China

The world we are living in now is a world with diversified languages. The foreign language competence of a country has become an important part of its national soft power. The formulation and adjustment of the language-in-education policy of China can also learn from the experience and lessons of other countries to improve the national foreign language competence of China.

Firstly, our country should take improving the national foreign language ability as the main goal, and formulate the unified national foreign language education policy. One of the main reasons why Britain ranks last in Europe in terms of foreign language proficiency is that it does not have a unified language policy at the national level.

Secondly, the primary and secondary schools in China currently take English as the most important foreign language, which is directly related to our foreign language policy. Whereas, in some primary and secondary schools in some areas, due to some historical or regional reasons, Russian and Japanese are the foreign languages over there. Moreover, over the years, the English level and ability of primary and middle school students have been improved greatly. And the United Kingdom does not have the language that carries on unified regulation to the school foreign language education, the school can decide to open the language of foreign language independently. Our country should provide students with more other language programs besides English appropriately, such as French, German, Japanese, Korean and other useful languages at the stage of whole world. With the deepening reform and opening-up policy, more and more foreign language talents will be needed in order to serve the economic and social development of China in the New Era of the 21st century.

Thirdly, in terms of the age of pupils to start their foreign language learning, we can also learn from the United Kingdom. We all know that some pupils may start their foreign language learning from the first year of their primary schools in some regions, while some pupils are required to start their foreign language learning from the third year of their primary schools.

## 7. Conclusion

Currently, thanks to the opportunity of Brexit, the UK should study and formulate its language-in-education policies in order to enhance its comprehensive competitiveness. China should also use British experience as reference and formulate its own language-in-education policies on the basis of the national situations so as to provide language service and support for the comprehensive development of China in the New Era.

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