

A Comparative Study on the Foreign Language Education Policies of China and Other Countries¹

ÉTUDES COMPARATIVES SUR LES POLITIQUES DE L'ENSEIGNEMENT LINGUISTIQUE CHINOISES ET ÉTRANGÈRES

DONG Hai-lin²

WANG Xiao-ling³

Abstract: This paper demonstrates that at present the study of foreign languages education policy is not deep enough. But at the same time, it is of great benefit for Chinese government to adapt to foreign languages education policy; to localize the foreign experiences; to regulate foreign languages teaching from the perspective of strategy. Some problems are pointed out when the government is making the foreign languages education policy.

Key words: China and Other countries' foreign language teaching; Education policy; Comparative study

Résumé: Cet article montre qu'à l'heure actuelle l'étude sur la politique de l'enseignement des langues étrangères n'est pas assez profonde. Mais en même temps, il est d'une grande utilité pour le gouvernement chinois de s'adapter à la politique de l'enseignement des langues étrangères; de localiser les expériences étrangères; de réglementer l'enseignement des langues étrangères dans une perspective stratégique. Certains problèmes sont mis en évidence lorsque le gouvernement établit la politique de l'enseignement des langues étrangères.

Mots-clés: enseignement de langues étrangères en Chine et dans d'autres pays; politique de l'éducation; étude comparative

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² Associate Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Hebei Polytechnic University, Tangshan, 063009 Hebei. Research area: cross-culture communication. Email: hailindong@163.com

³ Professor, Department of Foreign Languages, Hebei Polytechnic University, Tangshan, 063009 Hebei. Research area: linguistics, teaching methodology. Email: xlwangxlwang@hotmail.com.

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1.

With the further and more profound development of the reform in foreign language education in the 21st century in China, many insightful scholars turned to pay attention to the foreign language education policy exerted in other countries for our reference. However, generally speaking, the research on the foreign language education policy in China is still in the initial stage. A study on over 20 papers on the subject retrieved from the academic journals shows that 80% of the papers only introduce but not make an overall study on the foreign language education policy in other countries. Until now, the Key Research Base of the Humanities and Social Science of the Ministry of Education in Beijing Foreign Studies University has been the only organization that has conducted a comprehensive project on the research of foreign language education in other countries, studying the progresses of foreign language education (mainly the English language education) of more than 10 non English-speaking countries. Whereas, the project is only concerned about the studies of English education in the non English-speaking countries with no regard to the foreign language education in the English-speaking countries or the comparative studies of the foreign language policy of the target countries.

From a global view, many countries have carried out the comparative study on the foreign language education policies, especially the European Union countries and the Southeast Asian countries, but their studies are limited to the regional comparisons. For example, the European countries mainly focus on the research on the foreign language education policies of the European countries, and likewise the Southeast countries' research attention focuses on the ASEAN countries. For the other countries outside their region, they are more interested in researching on the policies of the Anglo-American countries, with less focus on China's foreign language education.

2.

There are several reasons why we should conduct comparative studies on the foreign language education policy in China and in other countries.

1). A more profound study on the foreign language education in other countries will help China to adjust our own foreign language education policy: A better understanding of other countries' national foreign language education policies and plans, their education management system, their teaching time and standards of the foreign language education, and the allocation of the foreign languages will inspire us to reflect on our own policy and management system of the foreign language education, promote the institutional reform on the foreign language education and give a theoretical basis and reference for making a long-term development plan of the foreign language education.

2) Enhancing the research on foreign language education is useful to assimilate the other countries' successful experiences in China. The number of the English learners in China is the largest in the world. However, the depth of our research on the English teaching is far from the European countries and Japan. One of the reasons is that although the foreign language educators in China are highly enthusiastic and a large number of papers have been published in recent years, however, in the present studies on foreign language education there are fewer macro researches than the micro researches, fewer empirical researches than the theoretical researches, fewer systematic researches than the partial researches, fewer creations of our own theories than introducing the other countries' theories, as a result, our foreign language education research has always been in a backward state;

3) Conducting the studies of foreign Language education will help us to make a strategic plan on our own foreign language education. A detailed understanding on the policies of foreign education in other countries will also be helpful for us to predict their international strategic planning, the trends of international relations and international trades, and a good knowledge of the importance of one country to another country, for example, we could predict the importance of China to a certain country through the Chinese education status in the target country.

3.

The development of the Foreign Language Education Policy in the United States has been highly related to the strategic concerns on its national security with regard to politics, economics, military and foreign affairs. The national security is both the reason and objective of the States making its own foreign language education policy. It has started with the "National Defense Education Act". On October 4th, 1957, the former Soviet Union successfully launched the first man-made satellite in the world. The American government felt unprecedentedly threatened and challenged by the high technology of former Soviet Union. "National Defense Education Act" first elevated the foreign language education to the same importance level with the mathematics and science education, prospecting a prime time for the foreign language education in America. Supported by the law, the foreign education in the primary and secondary schools has been improved greatly both in terms of quantity and quality.

In 1996, the working group led by the American Foreign Language Education Commission (ACTEL) and funded by U.S. Department of Education and the National Endowment for the Humanities, worked for 3 years to develop the "Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century" (hereinafter referred to as the "Standards") for all students in K-12 grades in a national with its latest the concept of foreign language education.

Subsequently, many states have also developed their own foreign language standards. It was the first time in the history of American education to conduct such a large scaled establishment of a national standard for academic learning. The revised "Standards" has extended its application to foreign language education in the universities. It lists the five major objectives of the foreign language learning in the United States in the 21st century, namely, Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparison and Communities, referred to as 5Cs. The "Standards" also proposes seven course elements in the teaching practice: the language system, the communication strategy, the cultural content, the learning strategy, the content of other disciplines and critical thinking skills and technology. The launching of this "Standards" at the end of the 20th century shows the United States has become convinced that in this interdependent global village, the level of its foreign language education is of great importance to the economic competitiveness and national security. In 1998, the 9.11 attack shocked the entire United States. A survey undertaken on the matter afterwards shows that the relevant departments of the U.S. government had received some of the materials related to the preparation of the attack before September 11, but most of these materials are written in the Arabic language or the languages of the Far East region, there was not enough qualified translators to ensure a timely translation of them into English. Otherwise, the authorities may find some clues prior to the 9.11 attack. After the 9.11 incident, the U.S. Government has realized the close relationship between the foreign language education and national security, and has issued a series of national policies to improve the national foreign language level in recent years. In January 2006, the federal government of the States officially promulgated the "National Security Language Action Plan", supporting and funding the foreign language education from the kindergarten to the university, vigorously promoting the improvement of the foreign language teachers, and developing the training of the talents mastering a high level of foreign languages including Arabic, Chinese, Russian, Korean, Farsi, Hindi, and Central American languages. By 2007, the key languages selected have extended to Urdu, Tajik, Punjabi and so on. Hereby, we could like to highlight the Chinese language teaching in the States in the past few years. The Ministry of Education has selected four leading universities in the U.S. to start a project known as the "Chinese Language Teaching Flagship", and cooperated with the universities in China such as Nanjing University to promote the Chinese language education. The project supported American students to study Chinese in the universities in China, take Chinese proficiency tests, live with Chinese families and do their internship in the Chinese enterprises. Supported by the United States Department of Defense and National Intelligence Center, the National Foreign Language Center of America sent more than 1,300 students to China to learn Chinese in the year of 2007.

In the past years, the U.S. government has made every effort to develop the foreign language education from a national strategic perspective. And it is a good practice for our reference.

4.

There are several problems to be attended to in making the foreign language education policy in China:

After the reform and open policy in the 1980s, we admired the Anglo-American teaching philosophy, followed the Anglo-American teaching model, and transplanted their popular teaching methods, for example, to a large extent, China's foreign language education management system is still being influenced by the planned economy of the former Soviet Union, and the western communication teaching approach is still very popular in our foreign language teaching. As a result, China has not found a suitable education theory and a teaching system for our own. Therefore, our foreign language education must make more efforts to create our own research system instead of solely borrowing experiences from the others. To reform China's foreign language education, we should take the unique situation in China into consideration and draw on the foreign experiences.

1). We must strengthen the foreign language education in the minority areas in China.

China's major fraternal minority groups, such as Tibetan, Mongolian, Hui, Uygur, Kazak, Miao, Korean, etc., primarily live in the border areas, contacting with neighboring countries and regions directly. These contacts involve many areas such as the trade, culture, education, security, foreign affairs, as well as all of the aspects in the daily life. It will be of great significance in the communication between China and the neighboring countries, if the minority groups could speak the language of their border countries. Currently, "terrorism" has increasingly become an important issue worldwide. With the intensification of the international terrorism, we should make more effort to strengthen our mission on anti-terrorism. The master of a foreign language for the people living in the border areas is of strategic significance.

2). We should strengthen the education of the other important foreign languages other than English.

At present, in the foreign language universities and colleges in China and the foreign language departments of a number of comprehensive universities have offered courses of the official language of the United Nations besides English. However, in the primary education in China, English prevails and there are no other foreign language courses offered, except in the north east of China, some schools offer the Russian and Japanese courses. In addition, some foreign language schools in a certain number of the provinces offer a few courses of French, German, Korean and so on. Generally speaking, it is not possible for an average student to reach a high level in the foreign language learning only after four years of undergraduate learning in the college. Even among the English majors in China, there are few qualified personnel who are capable of simultaneous interpretation and senior conference interpretation, and there are even fewer foreign language talents in other important languages. The high-level foreign language talents must be cultivated from a very young age. Therefore, the state should plan to set up the language courses other than English from the stage of compulsory education. At the same time, encourage the secondary schools in big cities with a better language environment to offer selective courses of the second foreign languages.

3). Enhance the education of Chinese and Chinese culture to the Chinese foreign language learners.

The national security can only be strengthened by the mutual understanding of the nations, therefore, it is necessary to enhance the Chinese education in the foreign language teaching in China. The foreign language learners must learn and borrow the advanced culture of the foreign countries, but more importantly, they must also cherish and spread our Chinese language and culture to introduce China to the world.

The foreign language education serve for our national strategy in terms of its objective, system and model, also at the same time, the foreign language talents should be cultivated with a strong sense of national responsibility and mission. This requires the Chinese language and culture education cannot be slighted when strengthening the foreign language education. National culture is an integral part of world culture. Without the exchanges of different cultures, there will not the advanced civilization in the world. In the process of globalization, the interaction and the interdependence between the various ethnic groups have been developed to a more profound level, and the collisions are inevitable. The world culture is the unity of the uniqueness and diversities of different nations. The common aspiration of national

development will make all ethnic groups realize the necessity to give up the prejudice. Only in this way the world culture could be progressed in the unity and diversity.

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