

Reflections on Foreign Language Education Policy Reform in China Under the Background of “One Belt and One Road” Initiative

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The initiative of “One Belt and One Road” is an important development strategy under the new normal economic background of China, and foreign economic development relies heavily on foreign language talents of the nation. However, the current foreign language education in China has faced problems from a shortage of compound foreign language talents, inadequacy of foreign languages offered, and imbalanced regional development. Given that the initiative has higher requirements for cultivating foreign language talents, we hold that China’s current foreign language education policy may reform from conducting theoretical studies of foreign language teaching, offering more foreign languages and enhancing professional development of teachers. Conversely, China’s foreign language talents can contribute more to the effective and smooth implementation of the “One Belt and One Road” initiative.

Keywords: “One Belt and One Road” initiative, foreign language education policy, foreign language ability

Introduction

Language policy refers to the relevant laws and regulations formulated by human social groups in the communication process based on their opinions on certain languages (Cai, 2002). And a country’s guiding ideology is embodied through its language policy. Therefore, the teaching and research staffs have devoted themselves to study foreign language education policies to foster China’s economic development. By the end of the first two decades of the 21st century, China’s foreign language education has achieved remarkable achievements.

At present, the initiative of “One Belt and One Road”, as an important part of China’s reform and opening-up, is one of the basic national policies that China must adhere to for a long time (An & Zhao, 2017). The “One Belt and One Road” development strategy involves more countries and regions than ever before, which is conducive to promoting the economic development of member countries, strengthening cooperation and communication between countries as well as the spreading of cultures. Meanwhile, it also puts forward higher requirements for the cultivation of foreign language talents in China. From a global perspective, foreign language education is not only an important part of national general education but is an effective means to joint with the Initiative. However, the current foreign language education in China is facing the problems of lack of high-end compound foreign language talents, inadequacy of foreign languages, and inequality of regional

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education. As a result, to promote the development of the “One Belt and One Road”, current foreign language education policies in China ask for a reasonable planning and adjustment.

Problems in China’s Foreign Language Education Policy From the Perspective of “One Belt and One Road”

Lacking of Compound Foreign Language Talents

“One Belt and One Road” encourages member countries to explore new models of economic cooperation and tap the potential of international markets to produce more employment positions and stimulate economic growth. We must be aware that there are many countries and economic fields involved in trade exchanges between countries. Although it brings economic benefits to related countries, it also inevitably exacerbates the technical, cultural, and political conflicts between China and other countries and these collisions need to be solved to a large extent by foreign language talents. Except for foreign language talents who major in linguistic and literature, the level of foreign language talents in other majors in China is generally far from satisfactory. A study showed that the annual economic loss caused by the lack of cross-cultural language communication skills of US company employees is as high as the US\$ 2 billion. The huge economic losses caused by a lack of foreign language resources are much higher than the state’s public expenditure on foreign language education (Zhang, 2007). Therefore, the formulation of a language policy must also consider its economic benefits. In 2018, the “National Standards for the Quality of Foreign Language and Literature Undergraduate Teaching” stated: “Our foreign language teaching aims to train foreign language professionals and compound foreign languages with good comprehensive qualities, solid basic skills and professional knowledge” (Cai, 2019, 3). In addition to being proficient in a foreign language, compound foreign language talents need to have at least equipped with one other professional knowledge. Compared with those who master a single foreign language, compound foreign language talents have an international perspective, understand international rules, and can participate in international affairs (Wen & Si, 2018).

Inadequacy of Foreign Languages Offered

Originated in China, “One Belt and One Road” spans Eurasia which connects the Asia-Pacific economic circle from the east as well as the European economic circle from the west. Different religious beliefs, customs, and cultures among member states are bound to hinder the implementation of the initiative. Language, as a bridge for human communication, is the basic guarantee for clearing these obstacles. However, the official languages differ among member states, such as Thai, Burmese, Russian, Kazakh, Arabic, and Malay. In China, English seems to be synonymous with our country’s foreign language. Most provinces in China default English as foreign language examination subject of a college entrance examination, consequently, almost all primary and secondary schools teach English as a foreign language. Although China has promoted the development of other types of foreign languages through the establishment of university talent training bases, limited policy support still causes imbalances in foreign language structure (Gao, 2014). Except for a few colleges and universities in China that are capable of offering other non-universal foreign language courses, most other comprehensive colleges only offer common foreign language courses, such as English, Russian, German, French, or Japanese while ignoring other minor languages. There are many countries along the economic belt “One Belt and One Road”, but as one of China’s most important foreign language talent training bases, Beijing Foreign Studies University currently has only taught 54 foreign languages, and Shanghai Foreign Studies

University just has 26 (Shu, 2013). The situation of an imbalanced structure of foreign language is very unfavorable to the training of multi-level foreign language talents to meet the demand of the initiative.

Regional Disparities in Foreign Language Education

Affected by geopolitical and economic levels, the educational level of Western China is generally lower than the national average, so it does not play a significant role in training foreign language talents. As a multi-ethnic country, ethnic minorities are mostly gregarious in the Western and frontier regions of China. For these ethnic minorities, Chinese is their second language while foreign language is a third language. Ethnic minority students have received their national language education since childhood and usually used their national languages to participate in the college entrance examination. To be worse, a large number of people even have never formally received foreign language education before college studies. On the other hand, many students from minority nationality areas need to overcome Chinese language barriers before they formally receive university education in the Mainland of China. So, they have limited time and energy to learn foreign languages. Studies have also shown that, even if the time of learning English is the same, the English level of minority college students in China as a whole will be significantly lower than Han students of the same age (Luan & Wang, 2018). Therefore, how to improve the foreign language ability of minority students has become an urgent issue for the development of “One Belt and One Road”.

Suggestions for Foreign Language Education Policy Reform in China

Strengthening Theoretical Research on Foreign Language Teaching

For a long time, there is no specific department in China has formulated foreign language education policy (Hu, 2009), and foreign language teaching in China mainly apply the teaching theories of Western countries, such as the grammar translations teaching method and the audiolingual method. But these foreign language teaching theories were originally designed for foreign language learners and did not consider the difference between a foreign language and a second language. Taking English as an example, many English majors in our country have learned English at least for 10 years. However, most of them have learned “dumb English”. China has not formulated a foreign language teaching theory by following China’s national condition, resulting in a lack of systematic and forward-looking theory. Dai Weidong (2001) who clarified the importance of constructing a foreign language education system with Chinese characteristics proposed that theoretical exploration of language teaching should proceed from reality. Shu Dingfang (2005) directly called for foreign language teaching theories with Chinese characteristics. Therefore, Chinese scholars should start from their national conditions and investigate Chinese students’ characteristics in foreign language learning to formulate foreign language learning theories that fit for Chinese students. By formulating foreign language teaching theories in line with the national conditions, a country could promulgate practical foreign language education policies.

Implementing a Diversified Foreign Language Education Policy

Since the implementation of the “One Belt and One Road” initiative, the number of foreign language teaching in universities has been increased, but the situation of “English dominance” has not been changed, which is very detrimental to the sustainable development of this initiative. China has a vast territory and the native languages of different ethnicities are also different. Therefore, different regions should appropriately adjust the types of foreign language according to a local language, economic, environmental, and cultural to

form a diversified foreign language education pattern. The construction of the “China-ASEAN Free Trade Area” requires a large number of foreign language translators and compound talents who are proficient in the languages of ASEAN countries. Therefore, schools at all levels in Southwest China can develop Vietnamese, Thai, and Cambodian as their foreign languages except for English. Northwest China is the transportation hub of “One Belt and One Road” and it adjoins to many Central Asia countries. Therefore, these areas should strengthen foreign language teaching, such as Persian, Arabic, Kazakh, and so on. Northeast China can focus on developing Russian, Japanese, Korean, Korean, and Mongolian. In addition to English, schools in eastern China should also strengthen the cultivating of non-common foreign language talents as much as possible. Therefore, a multi-foreign language education policy refers not only to the diversity of foreign languages but also to regional diversity. But it should be noted that as an international language, English will still play a unique role in the construction of “One Belt and One Road”.

Enhancing Foreign Language Teachers’ Professional Development

It is no exaggeration to say that the success of language teaching depends largely on the quality of language teachers. Teachers are the core strength of education and should master professional knowledge. China should strengthen the training of foreign language teachers and invite outstanding foreign language teachers to come to China to conduct academic lectures and impart successful experience. Foreign language teachers in primary and secondary schools should improve their teaching ability, and college teachers should strengthen their scientific research ability. Only foreign language teachers improve their quality and professional skills, they can find problems and take measures in practice. Besides, the assessment system for foreign language teachers should be further improved. Evaluation of teachers should not only concentrate on teachers teaching effects and research capabilities, but also teachers’ teaching attitudes, teaching methods, and teaching content.

Conclusion

Foreign language policy is closely related to national security interests, cultural interests, economic interests, and political interests. Therefore, the adjustment and planning of China’s foreign language education policy under the background of “One Belt and One Road” should take into account both the international and domestic environments. The current foreign language education policy can no longer fully meet the needs of China’s economic development. In brief, China must accelerate the adjustment and formulation of foreign language education policies to ensure the healthy and orderly development of foreign language education and cultivate high-end foreign language talents who can successfully meet the challenges from international society.

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