



Problems and Solutions in Bi-Foreign-Language Talents Cultivation in China's Universities

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Abstract

To cater the needs of social development, some universities in China set the program of bi-foreign-language study in recent years. As a new program, some problems still exist, which include learning hours, teaching methods, learning difficulties and teacher training. In this article, we have summarized the problems in the talent cultivation mode from four perspectives. First, too many learning hours in class and great stress from learning are a prevailing problem among the students. When setting the learning hours of the curriculum, universities should try to find a balanced point between teaching time and students' learning stress. Second, the problem in teaching method is that teachers rarely make contrastive analysis of the languages. It is suggested to make comparison or contrast between L2 and L3, so as to improve the efficiency of classroom teaching. Third, the difficulty encountered by the students is lack of time for autonomous study after class to ensure the learning of both languages. Teachers must help them improve their efficiency by utilizing their language aptitudes and apply appropriately their language learning strategies to L3 learning. Lastly, lack of trilingual teachers has become an obstacle hindering the development of the program, so there is an urgent need for the universities to provide training for teachers.

Key words: Bi-foreign-language talents; Third language acquisition; Foreign language education

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INTRODUCTION

Double foreign language study is a new specialty set in some China's universities in recent years. The aim is to cultivate talents with good commands of two foreign languages who can better meet the diverse demands of the society and thus can be more competitive in the job market. The cultivation of bi-foreign-language talents has been encouraged by the Chinese government. As early as in 1999, the Higher Education Foreign Language Teaching Committee of the Ministry of Education established the cultivation of bi-foreign-language talents as one of the cultivation modes of foreign language talents. With the specialty set in more universities, the last decade saw the study on bi-foreign-language talent cultivation as a fast growing field.

1. WHAT ARE BI-FOREIGN-LANGUAGE TALENTS?

Bi-foreign-language talents are one type of "comprehensive foreign language talents", the latter of which is defined by the Ministry of Education as "foreign language talents with proficiency in one foreign language and also having expertise in another subject". Thus bi-foreign-language talents can be defined as the talents who have very good command of one foreign language and also have adequate knowledge of and are skillful in the other foreign language. We usually call the major foreign language the first foreign language, and the minor one the second foreign language.

The specialty of bi-foreign-language study is a new attempt in foreign language talent cultivation. It is different from the conventional foreign language specialty where students only have very basic knowledge of their second foreign language. For bi-foreign-language students, as they are required to master two foreign languages well, they are expected to use both languages in their work after graduation. Thus this new specialty makes higher demand on the students.

2. BI-FOREIGN-LANGUAGE TALENT CULTIVATION AND RELATIVE RESEARCH

The cultivation of bi-foreign-language talents can be traced back to the 1980s when Shanghai Foreign Language University first set the specialty of Spanish and English study, and then the specialty of English and French study in Beijing Foreign Language University followed in 1984. At present some other universities or colleges also set up the specialty of double foreign languages, like the specialties of German+English, French+English, Spanish+English in Shanghai Foreign Language University, Japanese+English, English+Japanese, Russian+English, German+English, French+English in Dalian Foreign Language University, English+Japanese in Beijing Normal University, English+German, English+Russian, English+French in Shanxi University, etc. (Chen, 2009). Huizhou University where I am from also established the four-year specialty of English+Japanese in 2006, and then Japanese+English in 2008.

The modes of bi-foreign-language talent cultivation in China can be roughly divided into three types based on the learning contents. The first type is identified as “major+minor foreign languages”, i.e. upon graduation the students’ first or the major foreign language should be of high proficiency or advanced level, the second or the minor foreign language should be at intermediate level or above. This type of cultivation mode is adopted by most of the universities which have bi-foreign-language specialties. The second type is “double foreign languages+specialty”, which aims at cultivating talents who are skillful at two foreign languages and also grasp knowledge of another subject or specialty. This is an emerging specialty in recent years. For example Shanghai Foreign Language University has set up the specialty of “French and English+Economics”. The third type is “multi-languages”, which cultivates talents mastering three (or more) foreign languages. For example, Beijing Foreign Language University has a specialty of Lao. Besides learning Lao as their major foreign language, students of this specialty will learn English and Thai. Generally speaking, the first type is the most commonly adopted model in China’s universities, while the other

two types are only seen in very few universities due to the high demand on the part of the students. The following part of this paper will mainly discuss the first type of the cultivation mode in China’s universities.

Relevant research started at the turn of the 21st century, in line with the development of bi-foreign-language talent cultivation. As this is an emerging field in China, the studies are still rare and far from fruitful. Researchers in this field focus on the exploration of the goals and ways of talent cultivation, curriculum design and pedagogy, etc. (Xing, 2004). Most of these studies are theoretical and documentary, while empirical research is sporadic and few. Relevant research shows that the universities and colleges confirm the necessity of setting the specialty of bi-foreign-language, and most of the students also approve of it. Some of the universities have achieved preliminary progress on the talent cultivation (Zhu & Zhao, 2010).

3. PROBLEMS AND SOLUTIONS

Despite the achievement in the cultivation of bi-foreign-language talents, some problems still exist. After reviewing relevant literature, we summarize the problems on the talent cultivation mode from four perspectives as shown below.

3.1 Learning Hours

Here the learning hours refer to the time spent in class. Too many learning hours and great stress from learning are a prevailing problem among the students. The total learning hours for a four-year program can be as many as 3,500 hours. Taking Dalian Foreign Language University as an example, the total learning hours of the French+English Specialty is 3498, and that of the German+English is 3,464. It is no denying that learning two foreign languages requires more efforts and time invested, and generally speaking, more learning hours means more input of the language that learners are exposed to. However, it is not necessarily a good thing to have many learning hours. For one thing, too many learning hours would increase educational cost from the part of the universities, for another, too much time in class means less self-learning time for the students after class. So learning hours are not a the-more-the-better thing. When setting the learning hours of the curriculum, we should try to find a balanced point between teaching time and students’ learning stress.

3.2 Pedagogy

For a student majoring in bi-foreign-language study, he is a learner of L2 and L3. The learning of two foreign languages is in essence the process of Third Language Acquisition. Teachers should apply TLA theories to the teaching practice. But in reality, some teachers with wrong notions think that L2 would have negative

influence on L3, so they separate L3 teaching completely from L2 teaching. In L2 class, teachers only teach L2, and in L3 class only L3. Teachers rarely adopt the method of contrastive analysis of the languages, or compare L2 and L3 in a systematic manner. This is a problem in teaching methodology.

To address the problem, the method of contrastive analysis should be used in teaching. Actually making language contrastive analysis in L3 class has its theoretical basis. According to the transfer theories in TLA, Third Language Acquisition is a more complicated process than Second Language Acquisition as it involves more languages. In TLA, both L1 and L2 would have linguistic influence on L3, i.e. the learner's L1 and L2 knowledge are both likely transferred to L3 learning (Odlin, 2001). And such transfer can either be negative or positive. We can find many examples of positive transfer in language learning. An L2 Japanese learner whose L1 is Chinese would have more advantages than a Japanese learner whose L1 is English, due to the similar writing systems between Chinese and Japanese (Bu, 2013). So it is plausible to adopt contrastive analysis appropriately between languages in L3 teaching. Teachers can make comparison or contrast between L2 and L3, and even among L1, L2 and L3, so as to make students aware of the similarities and differences between languages. In this way, positive transfer can occur, and thus language learning efficiency will be improved.

In addition, combined use of L2 and L3 in class will also be a good teaching method. For example, for the students of Japanese+English specialty, we can set the course of Japanese-English Translation, or in Japanese class, the teacher can use English appropriately. Thus the learning of both L2 and L3 can be facilitated in class.

3.3 Learning Difficulties Encountered by Students

For students of bi-foreign-language study, the major problem they encounter is lack of time after class to learn both languages well. The students usually have 28 class hours or above for every week, therefore time for their self-learning after class is not enough. In such circumstances, it is undoubtedly a difficult task for them to master two foreign languages in only four or five years (a small number of the universities provide a five-year program). As the length of the school programs cannot be extended, to solve this problem, we must help students to improve their learning efficiency. Most of the students of four-year program learn English and another foreign language. This means they have already learned English for at least six years before going to university, as students in China usually learn English in middle school. Their L2 learning experience and language basis will be beneficial to the learning of L3. Since students can learn L2 successfully before, it suggests that they

possess adequate language aptitudes, and they have good command of language learning strategies. So teachers should help them utilize their language aptitudes and apply appropriately their language learning strategies to L3 learning.

3.4 Teacher Training

The teacher is the key problem of the cultivation of bi-foreign-language talents. Bi-foreign-language teaching requires teachers with trilingual competence and knowledge of Third Language Teaching. Teachers who are proficient in both the foreign languages can conduct the teaching method of language contrastive analysis skillfully and used L2 and L3 in class freely. And their previous experience of learning two foreign languages can let them understand students' learning difficulties, thus render help for the students. But in China teachers mastering two foreign languages are rare. Lack of trilingual teachers has become an obstacle hindering the cultivation of bi-foreign-language talents in China's universities. So there is an urgent need for the universities to train trilingual teachers.

The following ways should be workable under the present conditions with regard to teacher training. First, teachers can be sent to abroad to study the second foreign language. Second, teachers can study in the first-class universities in the country. Finally, universities can arrange language training for teachers locally, i.e. using the resources in the universities. Authorities of the universities should be fully aware of the urgency and necessity of teacher training, and provide adequate conditions for teachers.

The cultivation of bi-foreign-language is a new attempt in China's universities, so a lot of work remains to be done. We hope that more researchers can join in the studies and make more contribution to the trilingual talent cultivation.

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