

A Comparative Study of Foreign Language Education Policies Between China and the United States From the Perspective of National Interests

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Abstract

Based on the theory of educational policy, this paper constructs a theoretical analysis framework of foreign language education policy, which makes a comparative analysis of foreign language education policies in China and the United States from three dimensions—the process, content and value of foreign language education policy. We should learn from the advanced experience of the United States and reflect on the research of foreign language education policy in China so as to make suggestions.

Key words: Foreign language education policy; National interests; China; The United States

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1. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL ANALYSIS FRAMEWORK OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICY IN CHINA

Foreign language education policy refers to the code of conduct for foreign language education stipulated for the realization and service of the line and task in a certain historical period. It exists not only in the official policy documents issued by the national government, but also in the soft behavior norms such as the cultural concepts and values.

Shen Qi, a Chinese scholar, divides the research results of foreign language education policy into three categories: first, review of history and critical reflection; second, strategic foresight research; third, international comparative study on foreign language education policy. In recent years, the number of the previous categories of research has gradually decreased. However, the international comparative study on foreign language education policy is becoming more and more popular.

Most of the existing literature simply lists the foreign language education policies of the comparison objects, without in-depth comparative analysis under a certain framework or standard. Therefore, this paper intends to build a theoretical framework of foreign language education policy analysis by drawing on the three dimensions of policy research proposed by Hogwood and Gunn to make a comparative study of foreign language education policies in China and the United States. The theoretical framework is mainly from three aspects: process dimension, content dimension and value dimension. The process dimension of foreign language education policy studies the background, causes and implementation of foreign language education policy documents. The content dimension involves all aspects of foreign language curriculum and teaching reform. The value dimension mainly answers the question of “what is the value criterion for foreign language education policy to deal with various conflicting educational interest demands or to allocate limited educational resources?”

2. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE PROCESS DIMENSION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICIES IN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATES

The study of foreign language education policy from process dimension mainly involves the background

and reasons of documents in different countries. The formulation of every foreign language education policy is related to the politics, economy and culture of the society, reflecting the national interests in a specific period.

2.1 The Background and Reasons of the Three Stages of Foreign Language Education Policy in China

2.1.1 Foreign Language Education Policy From the Beginning of New China to the Beginning of Reform and Opening Up—Political Interests First

At the beginning of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the country was in a state of waste. The state compressed English education in an all-round way and vigorously promoted Russian education and trained Russian talents. On August 1, 1950, the interim teaching plan for middle schools (Draft) issued by the Ministry of education stipulated that a foreign language course should be set up in primary and high schools. Russian should be set up if possible. From this teaching plan, we can see the determination of the state to actively promote Russian education.

In the early 1960s, China and the Soviet Union began to have differences. Facing the military threat and nuclear deterrence of the Soviet Union, China adjusted its relations with the western countries in time according to its own national interests, and established more diplomatic relations with the western countries and the third world countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America. In order to meet the needs of political interests, the Chinese government formulated the seven year plan for foreign language education in 1964, which raised the position of English to the first foreign language, and established a number of foreign language schools. However, due to the arrival of the "Cultural Revolution", the plan had not really been implemented. In the period of Cultural Revolution, foreign language education became ideological and political education, and foreign language education stagnated, which also met the political needs at that time.

2.1.2 Foreign Language Education Policy From Reform and Opening Up to the End of the 20th Century: Economic Interests First

With the focus of the work of the party and the state transferred to economic work, economic interests had been highly valued in the decision-making of the party. In this period, the orientation of foreign language education policy also changed with the changes of national interests. The priority of foreign language education policy making was the national economic interests.

During this period, the state strengthened foreign language education in primary and secondary schools, expanded and built a large number of foreign language

colleges, schools and foreign language departments of comprehensive universities, successively promulgated *The four-year teaching plan for English Majors in foreign language colleges*, *The four-year teaching plan for English language and literature majors in comprehensive universities* and *The opinions on the reform of undergraduate education for foreign language major in the 21st century*. In addition, CET-4 and CET-6 were set up. With the increasingly close communication with other countries in the world, foreign languages have also been expanded, including the education of Japanese, French, German, Spanish and other languages. The status of foreign language education in the whole national education system has been greatly improved. The formulation and implementation of a series of foreign language education policies promote the economic development and modernization of the country.

2.1.3 Foreign Language Education Policy In The Era Of Globalization: National Cultural Interests First

At present, the integration of culture, economy and politics is deepening, and culture has gradually become an important factor affecting the core competitiveness of a country. In order to implement "education should face modernization, the world and the future", the Ministry of Education promulgated *The guiding opinions of the Ministry of education on actively promoting the opening of English courses in primary schools*, which promoted the English education in primary schools and stipulated that the English courses in primary schools should be started from grade 3.

From the perspective of foreign language education policies issued by the state during this period, it improved the position of foreign language education in the whole national education system and strengthened the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness of students.

2.2 The Background and Reasons of Foreign Language Education Policy in the United States

In the history of the United States, foreign language education policies are closely related to the national security of it. The "special military training program" was issued in 1942 because a large number of foreign language talents were needed to realize their military purposes. In 1958, The national defense education act was issued because the launch of the world's first man-made earth satellite by the Soviet Union in 1957 threatened American politics and Science Status. After the "9. 11" incident in 2001, the U. S. government once again realized the importance of foreign language education to the national security of the United States. In the 10 years after the "9. 11" incident, it issued a large number of foreign language education policy documents, and put forward the concept of "key foreign language" to focus on building the national security needs of the United States.

3. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE CONTENT DIMENSION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICIES IN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATE

3.1 The Starting Age and Duration of Foreign Language Learning in China and the United States

In the 20th century, students began to learn foreign languages from middle school for a long time. After entering the new century, the Ministry of education printed and distributed *The Guiding Opinions on Actively Promoting the Opening of English (Curriculum) Courses in Primary Schools*. It decided that from the autumn of 2001, primary schools in cities and counties across the country would gradually open English courses. At present, English courses are generally offered from the third grade of primary school, and some developed areas with better conditions have English courses since the first grade of primary school. In recent years, with the improvement of family conditions and the increasingly fierce competition, the starting age of foreign language learning of Chinese students becomes earlier. The time limit for Chinese students to learn a foreign language starts from primary school and has been implemented throughout the compulsory education stage. Senior high school also offers English courses for students in three years, while the time limit for College English is generally two years, so the time limit for Chinese students to learn a foreign language is generally 11 years.

The United States is a federal country. The time and length of foreign language courses are different in each state. In 2008, only 25% of primary schools offered foreign language courses, 58% of junior high schools offered foreign language courses, while the proportion of senior high schools offering foreign language education reached 91%. In addition, the proportion of foreign language teaching in American private primary and secondary schools is much higher than that in American public primary and secondary schools.

3.2 A comparison of Curriculum Standards in Foreign Language Education in China and the United States

Our country has set up English curriculum standards for all stages from primary school to university. In July 2001, China promulgated the English curriculum standard for full-time compulsory education in general senior middle school. In 2002, *The National English Curriculum Standard (compulsory education stage)* was issued and it put forward a goal of comprehensive development of foreign language abilities including language knowledge, language skills, learning strategies, emotional attitude and cultural awareness. In April 2000, *The English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors in Colleges and universities*,

approved by the Department of higher education of the Ministry of education, was issued, which clearly proposed that foreign language talents in the 21st century should be “compound talents”. In September 2007, the Ministry of Education issued *The College English curriculum teaching requirements* as the main basis for colleges and universities to organize Non-English Major Undergraduates’ English teaching. The requirements made it clear that the teaching goal of College English was to cultivate students’ comprehensive application ability, especially their listening and speaking ability, so as to meet the needs of China’s economic and social development and international communication.

The current national foreign language curriculum standard in the United States is *Foreign Languages in the 21st Century*, which is suitable for students at all stages. The standard includes five aspects: basic idea, educational goal, teaching content, sampling progress index and learning plan. Based on the theory of communicative ability, it attaches importance to the cultivation of foreign language learners’ ability to communicate in a multicultural world.

Compared with the curriculum standards of foreign language education in the United States, there are three deficiencies in educational curriculum standards in China. First, the curriculum standards are not unified. The curriculum standards of foreign languages in China are formulated by different departments in different stages. There is a lack of connection between the curriculum standards of primary and secondary schools and those of universities. However, the national curriculum standards of the United States cover foreign language education from primary schools to universities with unified standards. Second, the curriculum standards of different languages are unbalanced. The 21st century foreign language learning standard in the United States is a cross language curriculum standard, which is formulated by experts from many language teachers’ associations, such as French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, etc. The curriculum standard of foreign language education in China is formulated with English as the main language. The curriculum standard of non-English languages is relatively backward, and many curriculum standards of small languages have not been issued. Third, foreign language and other subjects are lack of integration. The integration of foreign language curriculum and other subjects is conducive to the formation of a virtuous circle between them. The national curriculum standard of the United States advocates the integration of foreign language teaching and other disciplines, emphasizing the interdependence and mutual promotion of foreign language disciplines and other disciplines. Although foreign language education in China also advocates that foreign language education should cultivate compound talents, foreign language curriculum is still an isolated subject with language skills teaching as the main part.

4. A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF THE VALUE DIMENSION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION POLICIES IN CHINA AND THE UNITED STATE

In the process of foreign language education policy development research, policy value research is the most fundamental and core issue in foreign language education policy research. What foreign language education policy faces is not pure objective facts or natural phenomena, but the interest relationship, value conflict and value choice behind the phenomena.

For a long time, the foreign language education policy of our country is closely related to the political system, social and economic system, domestic and foreign policies and other factors. As a socialist country, our foreign language education policy must adhere to the socialist direction of running a school. It must serve the people, consolidate and develop the socialist system with Chinese characteristics. In foreign language education, we must grasp the correct ideological and political direction, and better spread the excellent cultural and social value orientation of our country to the world.

The value orientation of American foreign language education policy is very obvious, and safeguarding American national security is its most significant feature. Since the Second World War, various foreign language education policy documents issued by the U. S. government have confirmed this value orientation. After the “9. 11” incident, foreign language education policy has become an important part of the national security strategy of the United States.

5. IMPLICATION

Compared with American foreign language education, China’s foreign language education has many disadvantages, such as insufficient policy research, lack of scientific system of curriculum standard, single education mode and so on. Comparing the foreign language education between China and the United States, we can get the following enlightenment.

5.1 Strengthen the Study of Foreign Language Education Policies and Make Clear Objectives of Medium and Long Term Strategic Plan

The fundamental reason for the lack of research on foreign language education policy in China lies in the inaccuracy of the main body of policy making. Therefore, it is suggested to reform the current multi-head management model of foreign language education, further strengthen the research on foreign language policy and planning, and formulate a national medium and long-term strategic development plan with clear objectives.

5.2 Strengthen the Reform of Foreign Language Curriculum Standards, and Introduce a National Foreign Language Curriculum Standard

The competent department shall strengthen the reform of foreign language curriculum standards, and issue a curriculum standard covering primary school, junior school, senior high school and university on the basis of existing standards. The national foreign language curriculum standard aims to solve the confusion of teaching and evaluation caused by the disunity and imbalance of the current foreign language teaching curriculum standards in China.

5.3 Accelerate the Process of Localization of Foreign Language Teaching and Build a New Foreign Language Education Model Suitable for China’s National Conditions

It is suggested that foreign language teachers and researchers should reflect rationally on the reform of teaching methods, pay more attention to the non-verbal factors such as China’s actual situation, cultural and educational traditions, and language environment so as to accelerate the localization process of China’s foreign language teaching,

CONCLUSION

With the help of the theory of educational policy, this paper studies and compares the foreign language education policies of China and the United States from three aspects: the process, content and value dimension of foreign language education policies. First of all, by comparing the process dimension of foreign language education policies in China and the United States, it is concluded that a policy document with overall command and continuity will have an important impact on the level of foreign language education policies in a country. Compared with the United States, China lacks a unified foreign language education policy document throughout all stages of learning, so it is urgent to formulate and implement a unified English proficiency standard for Chinese learners. Secondly, through the comparison of learning period and curriculum standard in the content dimension of foreign language education policy between China and the United States, it is concluded that in terms of foreign language learning period, there has been a trend of low age for Chinese students to learn foreign languages, and the curriculum standard is not uniform. Third, by comparing the value dimension of foreign language education policies in China and the United States, we can see that China has its own national conditions, which is quite different from the value orientation of foreign language education policies in the United States. The value orientation of China’s foreign language education policy is to meet the needs of China’s

current national economic and social development, and to provide an effective foreign language guarantee for the smooth implementation of China's major policies.

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