

# A Brief Introduction to Foreign Languages Education Policy in China

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**Abstract:** Based on a series of official published documents and relevant research reports, the paper makes a brief introduction to foreign languages education policies in China, which included national English teaching guidance, national English language textbooks, national English curriculum standard and the massive English teachers training program, etc. At the same time, the paper also discusses relevant issues relating to minority languages education policy in China.

**Key words:** foreign languages education; English; policy; minorities; China.

## 1. Definition

Relevant research shows that, in China today, English has already become the most important foreign language since 1978 (Chen 2011). So when we talk about foreign languages in China, it usually refers to English language. Thus, here, we mainly introduce the English language education policy of China, and discuss relevant issues.

## 2. Basic English language education policies in China

Since 1978, English gradually became the dominant foreign language in China, which accompanied with the implementation of the state policy of opening to the outside and the reform. Most Chinese scholars believe that it has at least 30 years that English has been recommended as a dominant 2<sup>nd</sup> language in China (Chen 2011; Liu 2004; Yuan 2006). Based on previous documents and practices, and also in order to catch up with the step of curriculum reform of the world, in 2001, the Ministry of Education of China published the National English Language Teaching Guidance, for guiding the English language teaching and learning on the all levels of schools in the nation, and which covered the both macro and micro sides in English language education. Up to now, this Guidance is regarded as a milestone about English language education in China. The following is a brief translation about this guidance based on a Chinese version.

The first part of this document emphasizes that foreign language is the important tool for getting the information of science and culture from the world, and also the important one for improving the nation's qualities in science and culture, and also for strengthening the international communication and cooperation. Importantly, the document points out that it is the state policy of reform and opening to the outside makes the foreign language become an integrated part for all schooling education in the country.

The document clearly requires that English language course should be established in the first year in primary schools, and covering the duration of 6 years in the period of primary schools. And it also indicates the course hours per week and total course hours during one academic year: in the first and second academic year in primary schools, in sub-class, course hours should be 5 per week, and total course hours should reach 175 during one academic year; in third and fourth year, the total course hours should reach 280 per academic year; And in the fifth and sixth year, the total course hours also should reach 280 per academic year.

In this document (Ministry of Education of China, 2001), it also proposed clear requirements on teaching content: in the first stage (first and second academic year) in primary schools, the teaching content should focus on English listening and English speaking. in the second stage, it should begin to learn not only English listening and speaking, but also English reading and English writing; in the third one (fifth and sixth academic year), the contents should focus on English listening, speaking, reading and writing all round.

Further, the document proposed the minimum level that students should reach in 3 respective stages: in the first stage (year1 and year 1) under the support of visual aids, pictures, and teachers' action, students can make proper response to the teachers English demands; 2) under the support of visual aids, pictures, and teachers' action, students should not only understand the meanings of about 400 English words, but also need to speak them in correct pronunciation; 3) students should not only recite the English songs, but also need to sing them; 4) students can master the primary English words in usual life and can make simple dialogue in English.

In the second stage (year3 and year4), 1) Students primarily can understand the English words in the class; 2) students can recite the English alphabet orderly, and can distinguish and spelling the letters' capital and normal formats, and also need to distinguish the block and handwriting English words; 3) students can read the English words, sentences and the texts in correct pronunciation and tone; 4) according to the context, students can make simple conversation in correct pronunciation and tone; 5) students should not only understand and speak about 400 English words in correct pronunciation and tone, but also need to spell about 200 English words correctly; 6) students can correctly write the English letters, words and sentences in both capital and normal formats.

In the third stage (year 5 and year 6), 1) students can understand the English words in class, and can primarily understand the familiar listening materials which speed at 80 words per minutes; 2) on the basis of reading English words , sentences and texts in correct pronunciation and tone, students should master the key words, basic usage of basic expressions, and also need to speak about 400 English words in correct pronunciation and tone, and can spell usual English words about 250; 3) students can make daily conversation in English under the scope of their knowledge; 4) students can read and understand simple picture-illustrated English stories; 5) students can answer relevant questions relate to textbooks that they have learned in paper-based way, and should be able to write simple messages in English for communicating each other.

In fact, this Guidance is a revised one. Since in 1980, the Ministry of Education of China already published a similar one for guiding the national foreign language teaching and learning. 20 years passed, it is necessary for the government to issue a new one to instruct the foreign language teaching and learning of the whole country in order to catch up with the tide of curriculum reform around the world.

Accordingly, in order to implement such a massive English teaching program, China's central government also launched a series of supporting programs, which included a colossal English language teachers training program---millions of English teachers covered from primary schools to high schools across the nation all took part in the training during the period of 2001-2008. This colossal program aims at making millions of English teachers in China qualified for English teaching in order to implementing the new National English teaching Guidance and the National English Language Curriculum Standard across the country. But as various reasons, i.e. lack of qualified English language trainer; participants lack of necessary English teaching knowledge and skills, the results of the program did not reach the expected goals (Dong & Gui 2002; Zhang & Li 2010). For example, in Yunnan province, although thousands of English teachers (whose major are not English but who now teaching English as well.) passed the so called training, as lack of basic knowledge and skills in English teaching, about 80% of them does not qualified for English teaching in primary schools, secondary schools or high schools, i.e. such English teachers could not either speak English in a correct pronunciation or tone, or explain simplest English grammatical phenomena (Dong & Gui 2002; Zhang & Li 2010; Yuan 2006).

At the same time, similar guidance also published by the government for guiding the English teaching and learning which covered from secondary schools to high schools across the country. These guidance proposed more higher requirements on English language proficiency for both secondary and high school students compare with those of primary schools. But as various reasons (lack of qualified English teachers; test-oriented educational system; different economic conditions, etc.), there are few students can reach such levels when they finished their courses at both secondary and high schools (Dong & Gui 2002; Zhang & Li 2010; Yuan 2006).

Relevant programs which included curriculum reform-oriented National English Language Textbooks and the National English Language Curriculum Standard all launched simultaneously. The latter of course includes the national standard of English language attainment across the country, which requires that each student should reach the certain English level in their various stages in public schools (from primary schools to universities). For example, College English Test(CET) 4-6 aims at all college and universities' students whose major is not English; And English Major Test (EMT) 4-8 aims at all college and universities' students whose major is English, which means millions of Chinese college students have to face such English level tests each year. Hence, it is regarded that, since 1978, English was the only foreign language that

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received this type of attention in China (Chen 2011; Yuan 2006; Liu 2004). And such a series of official documents can also be part of the facts.

Since English already became the main foreign language in all Chinese schools (from primary schools to universities), how it was to be taught naturally became a key concern. According to relevant research (Chen 2010; Dong & Gui 2002; Zhang & Li 2010) and the author's observation, at about 80% of Chinese schools (from primary schools to high schools), English was only taught in foreign language class. And even in such classes, as lack of qualified English language teachers and necessary equipment, English was not the sole language of instruction---- English teachers have to translate English into Chinese for the students' better understanding. Awkwardly, as test-oriented educational system, in most Chinese schools, the goals of English teaching was not for improving students' English language proficiency, but mainly for helping students passing various English examinations (Chen 2010; Liu 2004; Dong & Gui 2002; Zhang & Li 2010). So we can see that a number of Chinese students, although they passed high level English tests, their English language proficiency were really poorer (Chen 2010; Liu 2004; Dong & Wang 2005). As in such circumstance, what English teachers take in the class is cramming—let students do more and more mimic testing papers for raising pass rate in various English examinations. For example, in China, we can see that a large number of students who passed the high level English tests, but they could not communicate with English native speakers in English smoothly and fluently.

Normally, as a high centralized nation, the China's central government language policy does not allow for any sensitivity or variation across the country. But in special cases, such as in Tibet and Xinjiang Weiwuer Autonomous Region, it is impossible to implement such language policy, because in these regions, minorities ethnic groups (Tibetan and Weiwuer) became the majorities, where Chinese Han became the minority who occupied less than 30% in the total population in these regions (Liu 2004; Chen 2010). So facing this fact, the central government has to take a flexible language policy which means a certain degree of variation will be allowed in the policy's implementation. Usually it said the local government will be permitted to make local policies or measures that match actual conditions of the regions (Liu 2004; Zhang & Li 2009; Yuan 2006).

Here, we can make a brief review of foreign language education policy in China over the past 60 years:

- 1) Before 1978(1949-1978). It can be divided into two stages: from 1949-1964, Russian is almost the only foreign language in China, and which should be taught in all schools; from 1964-1978, with the worse relation between China and Russia, and also accompanied with the defrozen relations between China and the USA, English began to become the main foreign language in China. For meeting the demand of communicating with western countries, China's government began to allow, and even encourage common people began to learn English in this period of time.
- 2) From 1978-2001. With closer relations between China and western countries, English gradually became the dominant foreign language in China. And China's central government took more policies or measures in encouraging common

- people to learn English, which including require all public schools should set up English course for all students. And English is treated as one of required three courses (the other two courses are Chinese literature and mathematics) for all secondary and high school students.
- 3) From 2001-the present, in order to catch up with the step of curriculum reform around the world, China' government began to launch a series of documents in curriculum reform, which also including new national English teaching guidance , new national English curriculum standard and new English language textbooks. And some of new concepts in English teaching and learning from western countries were introduced and adopted.
  - 4) Implementation of foreign language education policy is quite different in different regions of China. From 2001, China's government began to launch a massive English teachers training program across the country. As lack of qualified English teachers (trainers) and participants also lack of basic knowledge and skills, and also because of the colossal investment (it also needs the investment from local government.), the program did not reach the expected goals.
  - 5) Although the central government emphasizes that local government should be unreserved in the implementation of the national foreign language education policy, as different economic conditions, different culture and different history, the implementation shows quite different, even contradictory in different regions in China.
  - 6) Under the encouragement of government, more and more common Chinese people began to accept English as their main foreign language and more and more young Chinese people began to learn English as well. By this way, common Chinese people get to know real western countries.

From the above, we can say that China's central government pay high attention to English language education, as a series of official documents, standards and programs were published or launched, which included National English Language Teaching Guidance, National English Language Textbooks and the National English Language Curriculum Standard (which also included the standard of English language attainment across the country), and the massive English language teachers training program and a colossal investment on relevant equipment (Yuan 2006; Liu 2004; Zhang & Li 2010). And such a series of documents and programs covered from both macro and micro sides in English language education. Thus, the result can be drawn that English is treated as a most important foreign language in China and it has been taught in most Chinese public schools and has accompanied each Chinese student daily.

### **3. Minorities' Language Education Policy in China and Discussion**

China is a unified country with many ethnic groups. Besides the mainstream Han nationality, there are about 55 minorities spread over the country, with an aggregate population of about 108 million, which accounts for 9% of the total. Although the Chinese ethnic groups represent a relatively low proportion, they have played critical role in the socio-political economy lives of Chinese. And the reasons for this are three sides: first, they occupy 62% of total land areas of China. Second, over 90% of the border

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regions of China are occupied by these ethnic groups. Finally, by far the greatest portion, sometimes even the whole, many natural resources like forestry resources, mining resources, medical resources, etc. are all located in these minorities' regions. (Year Book of Yunnan, 1996). Because of the geographic and historical reasons, even today, these regions are still keep in poor economic conditions, and the education in these regions are also relatively weak in China.

In the past 60 years, minorities' language education policy in China obviously determined by the political needs of the ruling groups (Chen 2010; Zhang & Li 2009). It can be divided into three stages. Before 1978 (1949-1978), the China's central government allowed, even encouraged minorities' ethnic groups to develop their own language in public schools. According to relevant reports, the central government even helped nine national minorities create their own written languages. In this period of time, the basic minorities' language education policy of China was that the government allowed and encouraged bilingual education in public schools in the areas and regions where ethnic groups living in, which means teachers can use both Chinese Han language and minorities' own language (for students better understanding) in classes. In 1956, the China's central government launched their important document---National Putonghua Implementation Scheme (Chen 2010; Zhang & Li 2009). In this scheme, the central government clearly proposed the final goal of the plan, that was spreading the Putonghua (Mandarin, Chinese Han Language) in the nationwide, which implied that even in minorities' areas or regions like Tibet and Xinjiang Weiwuer Autonomous Region, Putonghua will finally be popularized. In this period of time, both central government and local government began to make trials in popularizing Putonghua in some areas and regions. Hence, many scholars think that this period can be thought as the first stage relates to minorities' language education policy in China (Chen 2011; Dong & Gui 2002; Liu 2004; Sheng 2005; Liu 2004; Zhang & Li 2009) , in which China's central government made and started to implement their ambitious language plan---unified the language across the country.

From 1979 to 1997, accompanied with the implementation of the nation's policy of opening to the outside and reform, in fact, minorities' languages were not be encouraged to use in most public schools—they have been replaced by a “new” foreign language—English language. The central government emphasized that it is the needs of opening to the outside and the reform, and also the needs of time. At this stage, English which treated as most important foreign language by the central government of China began to be popularized across the country (Chen 2010; Dong & Gui 2002; Liu 2004; Sheng 2005). On one hand, with closer relations between China and western countries, waves in English language learning appeared from one to another across the whole country, which has lasted for more than 30 years. On the other hand, minorities' languages were not allowed to be used as main language of instruction in most public schools in ethnic groups' areas or regions except those special regions like Tibet and Xinjiang Weiwuer Autonomous Region. In fact, even in these special regions, China's central government has made many trials in implementing their language plan---unifying the language across the nation. For example, in Shanghai and Beijing—developed regions in China, the central government has held special classes for the young people come from Tibet and

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Xinjiang, who were selected from these ethnic groups. These classes mainly aims at popularizing the Chinese Han language (Putonghua) and English language to these young people, and also introduced something about Chinese Han culture and some science knowledge. In official words, these classes mainly aim at cultivating successors for the future development of Tibet. Generally, the candidates for these classes should meet two requirements: 1) must be young native speakers of Tibet; 2) accept the leadership of the Communist Party of China. In fact, such type of classes has lasted for more than 30 years. And many of their students already became the leaders of local governments in Tibet (Yuan 2006; Liu 2004; Zhang & Li 2010).

Normally, this period can be treated as the second stage, in which English began to replace minorities languages in China, and the minorities languages have faced the challenge which they have never met,

The third stage is from 1998 to the present. During this period, the national minorities' language education policy obviously changed due to the political needs. In 1999 and later years, Tibetan independent movement broke out continuously. And in 2009, similar movement (the government called "riots".) also broke out in Xinjiang Weiwuer Autonomous Region. These incidents influenced the nation's stability directly and seriously. Facing these crucial challenges, the central government of China had to adjust their minorities' language education policy in order to meet the needs of political change--for building a firm, unified nation. We can clearly see that, on one hand, in special regions like Tibet and Xinjiang Weiwuer Autonomous Region, the central government has slowed their steps in implementing their language schemes--popularizing Chinese Han language (Putonghua) in most public schools in these regions. Minorities' languages are allowed to use as main language of instruction in most public schools in these regions. For showing high attention to minorities' language education, the government even established some institution for minorities' languages studies in these special regions. These actions mainly for two reasons: 1) showing to the outside, especially to western countries, China's central government treats minorities ethnic groups equally, and take actions in protecting and developing their cultural heritages (including minorities' languages); 2) provides consultations on policy-making for the government if necessary. On the other hand, in other regions (provinces) where minorities' ethnic groups occupied less proportion in the total population, the central government speed up their steps in popularizing Chinese Han language (Chen 2010; Sheng 2005; Zhang & Li 2009). In these regions like Yunnan Province, Guizhou Province, And Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, etc. minorities' languages are not allowed as main language of instruction in all schools (includes both public and private schools). The Chinese Han language (Putonghua) is required as sole legal language that must be taught in all public and private schools.

Unavoidably, under this condition, in some areas where minorities ethnic groups living in, minorities' language is being disappeared or facing the threaten of extinction (Yuan 2006; Hu 2008; Zhang & Li 2009). For example, in Shilin Yi Autonomous County, Yunnan Province, south west of China, where Yi ethnic group occupied nearly 30% in the total population. In their communities, Yi language is not allowed to be used in all

schools(Yuan 2006; Liu 2004; Zhang & Li 2010). The researchers found that even in primary schools in this county, pupils have gradually forgotten their mother tongue as it is prohibited to use once they attend the school and class. In fact, in these areas, more and more young people from these ethnic groups have acculturized by Chinese Han culture. Both their languages and culture are disappearing. Generally, the researcher called this phenomena “Hanalization” (Hu 2008; Zhang & Li 2010). Hence, based on historical and current facts, the researchers may predict that in the next one or two decades, more than half of these minorities’ languages will be extinct in China.

The third stage can be treated as such a period of time, in which the central government of China has taken different language policies in different regions in order to strengthen the stability of their ruling in the country. And the relations between minorities’ language education policy and the political needs of the ruling groups shows more closer than ever in this decade.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In brief, based on relevant research and the facts that the researcher got from China, the results can be drawn about both the foreign languages education policy and the minorities’ language education policy in China as follows:

- 1) English has been treated as most important foreign language in China. And the central government of China launched a series of documents and programs (which included National English Language Teaching Guidance, National English Language Textbooks, National English Language Curriculum Standard and the massive English language teachers training program, etc.) in order to improve English language proficiencies of Chinese students in all schools across the country,
- 2) Under the encouragement of government, more and more common Chinese people began to accept English as their main foreign language and more and more young Chinese people began to learn English as well. By this way, common Chinese people get to know real western countries. But as lack of qualified English teachers and test-oriented educational system, there is a long way to go for English language education in China.
- 3) At the same time, the Chinese Han language (Putonghua) has being popularized in all schools which covered from primary schools to universities across the nation.
- 4) Unifying the language across the whole country is the final goal of the central government of China.
- 5) Both foreign languages education policy and minorities’ language education policy is deeply determined by the political needs of ruling groups in China, which showed different characteristics in different stages in the past 60 years.
- 6) Accompanied with popularizing Chinese Han language and English language across the country, some minorities’ language is being disappeared in China.

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