

# Bilingual Teaching in Chinese Universities: Problems and Solutions

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**Abstract:** *In recent years, exchanges and cooperation between China and foreign countries have become increasingly frequent; consequently, the demand for bilingual talents has increased year by year. In order to adapt to the development of the times and improve the quality of higher education in China, the Chinese Ministry of Education has been promoting bilingual teaching as a priority among priorities of education reform. This paper first clarifies the connotation of the term “bilingual teaching” in comparison with “bilingual education”, from which the Chinese version of “bilingual teaching” originated. Then it discusses the significance of carrying out bilingual teaching in colleges and universities in China and analyzes the differences between bilingual teaching in China and bilingual education abroad. Finally, it identifies five major problems in bilingual teaching in Chinese universities and puts forward tentative solutions accordingly. It is hoped that our analysis of these problems and solutions would not only aid sustained development of bilingual teaching in China but also provide inspiration for other countries in their effort toward similar practice.*

**Keywords:** *bilingual teaching; bilingual education; colleges and universities; education reform; globalization*

## 1. Introduction

To aid the gearing of higher education in China “to the needs of modernization, the world, and the future”, the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China issued a document entitled “Some Guidelines on Promoting the All-Around Improvement of the Quality of Higher Education” in 2014, which explicitly mandated that colleges and universities in China should actively carry out bilingual teaching. Following these guidelines, Chinese universities took immediate action; with the implementation of higher education reform in China, bilingual teaching has been developing rapidly <sup>[1]</sup>. However, as bilingual teaching is still in its infancy, there still exist many problems in curriculum design and instructional management. How to solve these problems and how to ensure sustainable and stable development of bilingual teaching, therefore, has become a hot issue in higher education reform in China.

## 2. Connotation of “bilingual teaching”

The Chinese version of the term “bilingual teaching” is translated from “bilingual education” in English, but it has slightly different connotations. “Bilingual teaching” in China refers to the use of a foreign language as the instructional language in some or all subject-area courses <sup>[2]</sup>. “Bilingual education”, on the other hand, can be defined broadly or narrowly. Viewed broadly, “bilingual education” is understood as the concurrent use of two languages in classroom teaching while the narrow definition of “bilingual education” limits the use of an instructional language in the teaching of subject-area courses to a second language exclusively <sup>[3]</sup>. After hundreds of years’ development, the aims and goals of bilingual education have changed significantly. At its inception, bilingual education was driven by racial integration, cultural identification, social stability, and other political factors. For example, English language education in the early colonial periods in British colonies was a typical form of bilingual education <sup>[4]</sup>. Similarly, the concurrent use of the local ethnic language and the Chinese language as instructional languages in ethnic minority areas in China is, in essence, also a form of bilingual teaching <sup>[5]</sup>. In the contemporary age, bilingual education to a large extent is implemented to aid national, social, and individual development and to strengthen economic, technological, and cultural exchanges globally. In fact, some countries and regions even promote the use of three or four languages in classroom teaching in order to help students broaden their horizons.

### **3. Significance and functions of bilingual teaching**

An increasing number of countries and regions have come to realize the significance of bilingual teaching. The wide recognition of the value of bilingual teaching is attributable to its well- documented ability to promote individual, national, and social development <sup>[6]</sup>. The functions of bilingual teaching can be summarized as follows.

#### ***3.1 Improving students' language proficiency and all-around abilities***

The implementation of bilingual teaching in colleges and universities helps create an immersive language environment in which students are encouraged to view foreign languages not as compulsory subjects on which they are to be tested but as a means to acquiring specialized knowledge in subject-area courses. Through every-day instructional use of a foreign language in such an immersive environment, students naturally and gradually make improvements in listening, speaking, reading, and writing without having to spend a large amount of time outside of the classroom learning the target language. Thus, students are able to improve their language proficiency more efficiently and effectively.

Moreover, bilingual teaching also gives students access to the frontier of knowledge in various subject areas, where thoughts, ideas, and cultures from all over the world blend and converge. Not only do students develop an international perspective and a passion for learning, they also learn to think differently and to refine their interpersonal communication skills. In a nut shell, bilingual teaching helps students to improve their all-around abilities.

#### ***3.2 Aiding students' future development and career prospects***

The world we live in is open and inclusive. Economy, science, and technology are developing rapidly around the globe; economic and cultural exchanges between and among different countries, regions, and ethnic groups are constantly increasing. All these determine that bilingual literacy is a must for college students if they choose to work abroad after graduation or engage in scientific research <sup>[7]</sup>. In this regard, bilingual teaching not only aids students' future development but also boosts their career prospects, helping them make a smooth transition from school to work.

#### ***3.3 Promoting national and social progress***

Further advancement of globalization, cultural diversification, and information networking have significant impacts on the development of China. The future of China lies in the hands of a new generation of college students. As President Xi pointed out in a speech delivered at the 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, "if the young people are strong, the country will be strong." The implementation of bilingual teaching in Chinese universities can aid the rapid development of the all-around abilities of college students, which will indirectly yet ultimately help promote national and social progress.

### **4. Differences in bilingual teaching between China and abroad**

Bilingual education reform in most countries and regions started in the 1960s. The reform achieved remarkable success not only in traditionally bilingual countries such as the United States, Canada, and New Zealand but also in monolingual countries such as Australia, Japan, and Russia <sup>[8]</sup>. The implementation of bilingual teaching in China, however, lags behind and fails to offer an effective and timely response to national, societal, and individual needs despite the tremendous efforts exerted. Such a failure can be attributed to some of the differences between bilingual teaching in China and bilingual education abroad <sup>[9]</sup>.

Bilingual teaching in China and bilingual education abroad serve different purposes. Bilingual education abroad mostly targets ethnic minorities and immigrants and aids their enculturation into the local environment. By contrast, bilingual teaching in China targets colleges students and aims to help them assimilate the best of foreign cultures, expand their horizons, and improve their all-around abilities.

In terms of governmental support, bilingual education in many countries started locally as a bottom-up initiative and gradually gained governmental support with the expansion of its scale and the

increasing recognition of its effectiveness. Laws, regulations, and governmental guidance on bilingual teaching in China, however, are still lacking. The few existing governmental policies are a bit too general and fail to specify the criteria and forms of effective bilingual teaching.

Bilingual teaching in China and its counterparts abroad are also driven by different teaching philosophies. Undergraduate education abroad pays much attention to cultivating students' ability to find, analyze, and finally solve problems, and bilingual education is naturally and easily integrated into regular classroom teaching<sup>[10]</sup>. In the Chinese college classrooms, however, teachers place an almost exclusive emphasis on the purpose and systematic nature of learning to the extent of neglecting the essence and goal of bilingual teaching.

## **5. Problems in the implementation of bilingual teaching in Chinese universities**

In recent years, the Chinese Ministry of Education has been gradually accelerating bilingual teaching reform in Chinese universities, and the reform has achieved some success. Nevertheless, there still exist many problems in the implementation of bilingual teaching in colleges and universities in China. In the following sections, we list and discuss the problems that remain to be solved and that warrant immediate attention.

### ***5.1 Lack of a proper understanding of bilingual teaching***

As bilingual teaching in China is still at its inception, colleges and universities have not reached a consensus on what it entails. There is a lack of a proper understanding of the role, objectives, and functions of bilingual teaching. Bilingual teaching is often mistakenly equated with second language teaching; as a result, bilingual courses become foreign language training courses or even programming language courses. In addition, many universities tend to blindly follow and replicate existing practices abroad without making any adaptations to the local context. Some universities, on the other hand, turn bilingual courses into oral English courses, in which the teacher translates the teaching material word for word while lecturing. These misconceptions of bilingual teaching directly result in a deviation from the original goal of bilingual teaching<sup>[11]</sup>.

### ***5.2 Lack of suitable textbooks***

To help promote bilingual teaching, Chinese universities have adopted many foreign textbooks in their original edition. Although these textbooks offer a good combination of theory and practice, they do not respond well to the needs of Chinese teachers and students due to significant cultural and regional differences. Suitable textbooks that can be effectively used in bilingual courses in Chinese universities are hard to find for the following reasons.

First, most universities and students cannot afford to buy foreign textbooks as they are very costly. Large-scale adoption of foreign textbooks is impractical and can hardly become common practice.

Secondly, when adopting foreign textbooks, often times, only textbooks in a particular subject area are adopted, and textbooks in related areas are not included. The negligence of the inherent connections between and among textbooks may cause knowledge to be arbitrarily segmented.

Thirdly, due to cultural and philosophical differences as well as political misalignments, foreign textbooks in their original edition are not suitable for use with their inherent ideologies and epistemologies.

In short, the selection of suitable textbooks presents one of the major challenges in bilingual teaching reform in China.

### ***5.3 Lack of qualified bilingual teachers***

Teachers are the key practitioners of bilingual teaching; a determining factor in successful implementation of bilingual teaching and in assurance of the quality of teaching is the language proficiency of teachers. Bilingual teaching requires all-around abilities; that is, teachers should be not only subject-matter experts but also fluent users of the target language. Yet there is currently a lack of such qualified teachers. Subject-matter experts often lack the kind of language proficiency needed for effective bilingual teaching, and language teachers, on the other hand, are only capable of teaching the target language and do not have adequate specialized knowledge needed to teach subject-area courses

[12].

#### ***5.4 Variation in students' language proficiency***

With the constant increase of enrollment in Chinese universities, undergraduate education in China is undergoing a shift from elite education to mass education. As a result, language abilities of college students vary considerably; so do their receptive abilities. Students with a relatively low-level of language proficiency find it difficult to follow their teachers in class and to understand course materials. Worse still, some students are resistant to learning a foreign language to begin with; for these students, bilingual teaching can be futile.

#### ***5.5 Difficulty in evaluation and assessment***

In 2004, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued a document entitled "Evaluation Scheme of Undergraduate Teaching in Colleges and Universities", which delineated the standards and criteria for evaluating the quality of teaching in Chinese universities. Yet there is still a lack of systematic assessment guidelines specifically targeting bilingual teaching; many issues remain unclear or ambiguous. For example, it is not clear how to measure the degree in which bilingual courses meet the content requirements of subject-area courses or how to determine the qualifications of the course instructors. There is also a lack of informed understanding about how to evaluate the quality of teaching and how to assess student performance in bilingual classrooms.

In short, currently, there still exist many problems in bilingual teaching in China. Only by solving these problems step by step can we continue to promote bilingual teaching reform in Chinese universities in a sustainable manner.

### **6. Tentative solutions to problems in bilingual teaching**

Bilingual teaching reform in Chinese universities still has a long way to go. Based on previous analysis of the problems that Chinese universities face at the current stage in their effort to implement bilingual teaching, we put forward some tentative solutions as follows.

#### ***6.1 Develop a proper understanding of bilingual teaching***

The key to success in bilingual teaching reform is the willingness and ability of school administrators and governmental agencies to actively promote and implement bilingual teaching. Under the guidance of related governmental policies, school administrators should take the initiative to encourage and guide the implementation of bilingual teaching. Governmental agencies concerned may organize learning trips on a regular basis for teachers and students to visit and learn from other universities that have achieved remarkable success in the implementation of bilingual teaching. In addition, universities should play an active role in helping teachers and students to develop an informed understanding of bilingual teaching and to experience its charm through various campus activities such as thematic lectures, bilingual teaching Q&A sessions, and bilingual subject-matter knowledge contests. Further, each university should customize its plan of bilingual teaching to its own needs based on on-site empirical research on the teaching and learning needs of teachers and students in the local context as well as on the "best" teaching practice of other universities.

#### ***6.2 Adopt suitable textbooks***

Textbooks currently adopted in bilingual courses in Chinese universities are not only costly but also fail to adequately support the goals and objectives of undergraduate education in China. To solve this problem, educational units in China should take the lead in facilitating the compilation of domestic textbooks suitable for use in bilingual classrooms in Chinese universities. Compared with foreign textbooks, these domestic textbooks would be better adapted to the local context and would align well with the learning needs and preferences of Chinese college students. In cases of necessary adoption of foreign textbooks, careful consideration should be given to the connections between and among various subject areas in order to ensure that the adopted foreign textbooks form a systematic and structured whole. Careless adoption of textbooks in a single subject area should be avoided. In addition, before actual use in the bilingual classroom, foreign textbooks should be carefully examined and modified so that they are adequately adapted to the goals of undergraduate education in China and to the local

context of each school.

### ***6.3 Engage in teacher development and professionalization***

Currently, no university or institution in China offers systematic training on bilingual teaching, and there is a serious shortage of bilingual teachers with adequate specialized knowledge in related subject areas. To solve this problem, universities or governmental agencies concerned may selectively send some outstanding young teachers abroad to receive proper training on bilingual teaching. In the meantime, universities can also recruit experienced bilingual teachers from abroad to teach bilingual courses in China and to train domestic bilingual teachers. In addition, more effort should be devoted to the establishment of domestic bilingual training programs and institutions. A proper combination of all these measures will contribute to the professionalization and development of qualified bilingual teachers in Chinese universities.

### ***6.4 Implement tiered teaching***

As the language abilities of college students vary considerably, colleges and universities in China may adopt a tiered teaching model; that is, students can be placed in different tiers of classes based on their language proficiency. Thus, not only can we accommodate the different learning needs and preferences of individual students, we are also better able to arouse students' interest in bilingual learning and improve their learning efficiency.

### ***6.5 Create effective evaluation and assessment tools and strategies***

The complex nature of bilingual teaching determines that traditional forms of evaluation and assessment are no longer applicable. From the perspective of students, assessment of bilingual teaching should pay attention to the learning process as well as the learning outcome; that is, not only should students be provided with a quality learning process during which they acquire specialized knowledge in a systematic and structured manner, they should also exit each bilingual course with improved language proficiency. In terms of the qualification of bilingual teachers, they should have adequate specialized knowledge in related subject areas as well as a strong command of the target foreign language used for instruction and excellent verbal communication skills, all of which are indispensable<sup>[13]</sup>. In addition, in terms of the evaluation of student performance, we suggest that all tests and exams be created in the target language used for instruction. We also suggest that students' participation in class discussions using the target language should count as an important factor in formative assessment of student performance. Finally, in terms of evaluation of the quality of teaching, the work of teachers should be based primarily on student performance in bilingual subject-area courses.

## **7. Conclusion**

Bilingual teaching undoubtedly plays a key role in improving students' all-around abilities, boosting their employment prospects and promoting sustained national and societal development. With the successful implementation of the "Belt and Road" initiative, exchanges between China and other countries are constantly increasing; as a result, there is an increasingly urgent need for bilingual talents. Bilingual teaching has become an inevitable trend in higher education reform in China and will also become a major breakthrough to be made in undergraduate teaching in Chinese universities. It needs to be noted, though, that while we are actively expediting bilingual teaching reform, we should also carefully develop individualized measures that are tailored to the local context based on careful consideration of the regional culture, students' abilities, and the qualifications of the teachers. To sum up, although currently bilingual teaching in Chinese universities is still confronted with many problems and difficulties, we are confident that with the joint efforts of teachers, scholars, and educators alike, we will be able to develop effective models of bilingual teaching with Chinese characteristics. We also believe that our analysis of the problems and countermeasures of bilingual teaching in Chinese universities can be of help to other countries interested in similar practice and can hopefully inspire effective localization of bilingual course management and evaluation strategies learned from successful precedents all over the world.

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