

A Comparative Study of Chinese, American and European Foreign Language Education Policies

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Abstract: This paper constructs the theoretical framework of foreign language education policy analysis from the theory of educational policy, which compares the foreign language education policies of China, the United States and European Union from the dimensions of the process, content and value. Experiences and lessons are proposed from the practice of United States and European Union, which provide suggestions on the study of foreign language education policy in China.

Keywords: foreign language education policy; China; the United States; European Union; theoretical framework

1. Introduction

With the increasingly frequent exchanges among countries all over the world, foreign language education has become an important part of national education. Foreign language education involves not only personal growth, but also national political and economic development. Therefore, when formulating corresponding foreign language education policies, we need to comprehensively consider many influencing factors, such as considering certain educational costs and benefits, the demand of social development for foreign language talents, the best age for foreign language education, the knowledge content of foreign language education, etc. The state puts the formulation of foreign language education policy at a certain strategic development level and coordinates its relationship with social and economic development, which will greatly promote the improvement of national economic soft power. Therefore, a comparative study of foreign language education policies between China, the United States and Europe is proposed. Based on the educational policy theory, this paper investigates and compares the foreign language education policies of China, the United States and the European Union from three aspects: process dimension, content dimension and value dimension. 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 provide effective foreign language guarantee for the implementation of China's major policies.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework of Chinese Foreign Language Education Policy

Foreign language education policy refers to the rules related to foreign language education for realizing and serving the routes and tasks of a certain historical period. It exists not only in the official policy documents issued by the national government, but also in the behavior norms such as cultural concepts and values that it promotes. [1](P25) Foreign language education policy is an important part of language education policy. In foreign countries, as language education policy became an independent academic research field in the 1960s, foreign language education policy research has also attracted more and more attention. In China, research related to foreign language education policy has emerged since the 1990s, and it has become a hot topic of academic research in recent years. Chinese scholar Shen Qi divided the research results of Chinese foreign language education policy into three categories: first, historical review and critical reflection research; second, predictive research; third, international comparative research on foreign language education policies. [2] P65

Historical review, critical reflection, and predictive researches were all based on perceptual experience, which generally lacked systematic reasoning; most of the researches were description and introduction, there were only a few in-depth studies. In recent years, the researches in these two categories have gradually decreased. However, international comparative researches on foreign

language education policy have increased rapidly, and have gradually become a hot topic in foreign language education policy research. Among the researches, the research objects are mostly two countries, such as A comparative study of foreign language education policies between China and the United States (Zhang Zhiguo, 2009; Zhu Yuncui, 2014; Cao Di, 2015), A comparative study of foreign language education policies between China and France (Zhang Xingcai, 2014), A comparative study of foreign language education policies in the United States and Australia (Hao Chengmiao, 2014), A comparative study of foreign language education policies in China and South Korea (Cheng Hong, 2014). Based on these facts, the current related researches have the following problems and deficiencies:

1) From the perspective of research objects, they are mostly two countries, and there is no comparison between multiple countries or supranational organizations.

2) From the perspective of content, most of the literature simply introduced the foreign language education policies without in-depth comparative analysis under a certain framework, let alone building systematic comparative analysis framework based on related theories. Thus, in terms of research objects, this article selects the United States, the only superpower in the world today; the EU, the supranational actor with the highest degree of integration and the best level of economic development, and China as the research objects, aiming to do a comparative study of foreign language education policies among the three countries/organization.

In terms of the theory of foreign language education policy, this article intends to construct a theoretical framework for foreign language education policy analysis based on the three dimensions of policy research proposed by Hogwood and Gunn (1984). The framework mainly analyzes foreign language education policies from three dimensions: process dimension, content dimension and value dimension.

Specifically, the research on the process dimension of foreign language education policy mainly answers the question "In order to achieve a certain goal of foreign language education policy, how to inform and implement the policy", the main research is about the background, the reason and the status of implementation of the policy. The content dimension of foreign language education policy is a link between policy and practice, involving all aspects of foreign language curriculum and teaching reform. The value research of foreign language education policy uses value analysis as a tool to analyze foreign language education policy, mainly to answer the question "What is the value criterion when dealing with conflicting educational interest demands or limited educational resources?" The value choice of foreign language education policy refers to the value orientation of foreign language education: whether it has purely instrumental value or has both humanistic value. [3] (P74) Under this theoretical framework, this article examines and compares foreign language education policies of China, the United States, and Europe Union from three specific levels: the process, content, and value of foreign language education policies.

3. A Comparative Analysis of the Process Dimension of Foreign Language Education Policies in China, the United States and Europe Union

The research of foreign language education policy process mainly involves important foreign language policy documents of different countries or supranational organizations, as well as the background and reasons for the publication of the documents. This article introduces and interprets important policy documents about foreign language education policies in China, the United States, and Europe Union. For more than half a century, Europe has been committed to the construction of internal integration and actively promotes and maintains the multilingualism. In the past few decades, Europe has adopted a series of measures to promote the development of foreign language education in Europe. As early as the 1970s, the European Council issued the "Basic Standards for European Language Learning", also known as the "Language Proficiency Scale". In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the European Union successively launched the famous Erasmus, Socrates and Da Vinci projects. [1] (P92) However, the landmark influence on the European foreign language education policy was the "Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Evaluation" (CEFR), which was promulgated in November 2001. "The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Evaluation" is an overall guideline and action plan for language learning, teaching and evaluation formulated by the Council of Europe. It is a systematic summary of the theory and practice of European language teaching for decades. The new language policies and standards reflect the new concepts of modern European language teaching and learning.

The discussion of the Common Reference Framework helped taking the new direction of language education in the 21st century. The introduction of this framework also affected the formulation of other countries and regions. Similar language education policies and standards have provided an important reference and basis for reference, and have had a profound impact on language education policies throughout the world.

Although the United States is a country of immigrants, foreign language education has been ignored for a long time since the founding of the nation. In the history of the United States, the introduction of foreign language education policies has been closely related to the national security of the United States. The "Military Special Training Program" introduced in 1942 was related to the United States' need for a large number of foreign language talents to achieve its military goals during World War II. The National Defense Education Act of 1958 was related to the launch of the world's first artificial earth satellite by the Soviet Union in 1957, which threatened the political and scientific status of the United States. In order to meet the needs of the United States' international economic and security competition in the 21st century, the US government issued the "Foreign Language Learning Standards: Preparing for the 21st Century" in 1996. This document proposed five core standards for foreign language learning: Communication, Cultures, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities, which is referred to as the 5C standard. Since then, the US government has revised the standard in 1999 and 2006 respectively. After the September 11 attacks in 2001, the U.S. government once again deeply realized the importance of foreign language education to the national security. In the 10 years after the September 11 attacks, U.S. government issued a large number of foreign language education policy documents, and the concept of "key foreign language" was put forward to guarantee the national security of the United States is put forward.

Since the founding of People's Republic of China, Chinese foreign language education policy can be divided into two phases. The first phase is from the founding of People's Republic of China to the Cultural Revolution, during which the main foreign language is Russian; the second phase is from the reform and opening up till now. During which the main foreign language is English. Since the implementation of the reform and opening policy, in order to ensure the international communication and economic construction, the Ministry of Education has issued several versions of the "English Syllabus for Primary and Secondary Schools" as well as other policy documents in the 1980s and 1990s such as CET4/6. These measures have played a positive role in promoting the development of Chinese English education since the 21st century, with the rapid development of Chinese economy and the increase of Chinese international status, new requirements for China's foreign language education must be taken into consideration. Based on the English Curriculum Standards Experimental Draft (2001), the Ministry of Education formally promulgated it in December 2011 "The new compulsory education English curriculum standard" (2011 new curriculum standard). In January 2018, the "National Standards for Undergraduate Professional Teaching Quality in Regular Higher Education Institutions" was officially released by the Ministry of Education. This is the first national standard document for higher education teaching quality released to the whole country and the world. The new national standard has clearly stipulated the training objectives, training specifications, faculty, teaching conditions and other aspects of foreign language majors. It is a programmatic document guiding Chinese higher education in the new era, which plays an important role to the development of foreign language majors in Chinese universities.

4. Comparative Analysis of the Content Dimension of Foreign Language Education Policies in China, the United States, and the European Union

The content dimension of foreign language education policy research is the implementation level of foreign language education policy, involving all aspects of foreign language curriculum and teaching reform. This article focuses on the selection of foreign languages, the starting age of foreign language learning and the length of the study, which are two hot topics that we are generally concerned about.

4.1. The Selection of Foreign Languages in China, the United States and European Union

The EU is a supranational actor. With the completion of the Brexit process, the EU now has 27 member states. There are 24 official languages with equal rights in the European Union, which include English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch etc. The official documents, publications, conferences, and official websites of EU must be used with all these languages. Among the official languages, English, French, and German are the three main working languages of the

European Union. Most member states of the European Union require their citizens to choose a foreign language in addition to English. The EU member states have close ties and frequent exchanges, so their citizens are generally encouraged to choose the language of a country that has close political and economic ties with their own country as the main foreign language. According to data from the European Commission: English is the most widely studied foreign language among Europeans, followed by French, German and Spanish. Overall, 89% of students learn English, 32% learn French, 18% learn German, and 8% learn Spanish. [1] (P89)

The United States is a country of immigrants, and the selection of foreign language is related to the identity and background of the immigrant group. Due to the large number of Latino immigrants in the United States, Spanish has long been the first foreign language in the United States, followed by French, Japanese, and Italian. The U.S. government's enthusiasm for foreign language education has not been high for a long time. It was only after the September 11 attacks that the U.S. government understood the threat to U.S. security caused by the lack of foreign language education. Therefore, in 2006 the U.S. government proposed the "critical language" strategy for national security. Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Hindi, Japanese, Persian, and Turkish are listed as the eight most important foreign languages related to the national security and development of the United States. At the same time, the U.S. government has also formulated a series of specific plans to ensure the implementation of this "critical language" strategy.

The selection of foreign languages in China has always been closely related to Chinese international and domestic policies and situation. After the founding of the People's Republic of China, due to the "One-sided policy towards the Soviet Union", Russian was the best choice as a foreign language for a long time. After the rupture of Sino-Soviet relations, the status of Russian has declined. With the implementation of Chinese reform and opening-up policy, English has replaced Russian and has become the first foreign language in China. With the rapid speed of globalization and China's integration into the world, the selection of foreign languages in China has also shown a diversified trend. Inspired by the American "key language" strategy, Chinese scholars have also begun to actively explore the key foreign languages that China needs. Chinese scholar Zhang Zhiguo (2011) analyzed factors such as politics, economy, national strength, information security, geographic location, and derived 24 Chinese "key foreign languages".

4.2. Starting Age and Length of Foreign Language Learning in China, the United States and European Union

In the 20th century, Chinese students started to learn foreign languages from middle school. After entering the new century, the Ministry of Education issued the "Guidance on Actively Promoting the Establishment of English (Curriculum) Courses in Primary Schools", which decided that starting from the autumn of 2001, primary schools in cities and counties across the country gradually setup English courses. Nowadays, English courses are generally offered nationwide from the third grade of elementary school, and some developed areas with better conditions set up English courses from the first grade of elementary school. In recent years, with the improvement of family conditions and the increasingly fierce competition, the starting age of foreign language learning has a tendency to be earlier. Chinese students learn English for three years in elementary school and three years in junior high school, another three years in senior high school. College English is generally offered for two years, so the period of foreign language learning for Chinese students is around 11 years.

EU countries attach great importance to the foreign language learning of their citizens. For most EU countries, schools require students to master two foreign languages. The first foreign language learning generally starts from elementary school, while the second foreign language learning generally starts from middle school. The majority of EU countries have listed foreign language as a compulsory course in national education, and the length of foreign language learning ranges from 4 to 13 years. [1] (P88)

The United States is a federal country; the time of study for foreign language courses varies from state to state. In 2008, only 25% of elementary schools set up foreign language courses, 58% in junior high schools and it reached 91% in senior high schools. [1] (P126) In addition, the rate of foreign language teaching in private schools in the United States is much higher than that in public schools.

5. Comparative Analysis of the Value Dimension of Foreign Language Education Policies in China, the United States, and the European Union

Among the researches of foreign language education, policy value research is the most fundamental and core issue. Foreign language education policies are not about objective facts or natural phenomena, but also about the interest relationships, value conflicts and value choices behind the phenomena. [4] (P44) For a long time, Chinese foreign language education policy has been closely related to Chinese political system, social and economic system, domestic and foreign policies. As a socialist country, Chinese foreign language education policy must adhere to the socialist values; persist in serving the people, serving the consolidation and development of the socialist system with Chinese characteristics, and serving reform and opening up and socialist modernization. When conducting foreign language education, we must adhere to the correct ideological and political direction, and better spread our country's excellent cultural and social values.

The EU is a supranational actor, the integration of economy and politics has been its goal since its foundation. Therefore, on the basis of respecting and protecting the culture and language of the member states, ensuring that citizens of European countries can communicate within the EU without barriers are the value pursued by the EU foreign language education policy. The values are mainly based on the idea of advocating multicultural and multilingual learning under globalization and shaping the world's citizens. The release of the Common European Language Teaching Program is the result of its value research application. European value research believes that foreign language education should not only pursue its practical tools, but should implement the view of cultivating cross-cultural citizenship. It is necessary to consider the educational value of foreign languages more than just their uses. [4] (P44) The value orientation of the American foreign language education policy is very obvious, which is to guarantee the national security of the United States. Since the Second World War, various foreign language education policies issued by the US government have confirmed this value orientation. After the September 11 attacks, the foreign language education policy has become an important part of the national security strategy of the United States.

6. Conclusion

With the framework of educational policy theory, this article examines and compares foreign language education policies in China, the United States, and European Union from three dimensions: the process, content, and value dimensions. First, by comparing the process dimensions of foreign language education policies in China, the United States, and EU, it is concluded that a continuous policy that governs the overall situation will have an important impact on a country's foreign language education policy. Compared with the European Common Reference Framework for European Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Evaluation, a unified foreign language education policy that runs through all stages of learning is needed in China. The formulation and implementation of a unified English proficiency standard for Chinese learners is imminent. Secondly, through the comparison of foreign language selection and learning length in the content dimension of foreign language education policies in China, the United States and EU, it is concluded that in terms of the selection of foreign language, the foreign languages available in China are relatively rare. It has been unable to meet the needs of Chinese political, economic and social development, and it is urgent to promote the diversification of foreign languages in China. In terms of the period for foreign language learning, Chinese students have already start at a early age in learning foreign languages, but the learning effect is far inferior to that of European and American countries. Third, by comparing the value dimensions of foreign language education policies in China, the United States, and EU, it is concluded that China has its own national conditions, and there is a big difference in the value orientation of foreign language education policies from the European Union and the United States. The value orientation of Chinese foreign language education policy is to meet the needs of Chinese current national economic and social development, and to provide effective foreign language guarantees for the implementation of Chinese major policies.

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