

A Study on the Development and Evolution of Foreign Language Textbook Policies in Basic Education over the Past 40 Years of Reform and Opening Up

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Abstract: Over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, China's foreign language textbook policies for primary and secondary schools have gone through four stages: restoration and reconstruction period, transition and development period, comprehensive construction period, and deepening reform period. Due to the different times and national conditions, the focus of textbook policies at different stages is also different. This study reviews and analyzes the foreign language textbook policies in primary and secondary schools over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, and summarizes their evolutionary characteristics. Specifically, (1) In textbook editing, both social development and student needs are emphasized; (2) It had unified management and then introduced competitive mechanisms in textbook publishing; (3) In terms of textbook selection, it has shifted from using unified textbooks to choosing as needed; (4) On types of foreign languages, foreign language textbooks showed the change from "single" to "diverse". Based on the above research and analysis, some insights have also been gained, which are to adhere to the value orientation of China's foreign language textbook policy, clarify the value orientation of foreign language textbook, and optimize the foreign language textbook review mechanism.

Keywords: Textbook policy, Foreign language policy, Basic education, Reform and opening up

1. Introduction

Textbooks are an important carrier of course teaching content, an important lever for implementing educational requirements, and play a crucial supporting role in improving the level of education and teaching as well as the quality of talent cultivation. And textbook policies are the guidelines for textbook reform and development, as well as the guidelines for textbook construction^[1]. Over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, the development of foreign language education has achieved great progress, while also greatly assisting the country's development. And because its development cannot be separated from the top-level design of foreign language textbook policies, the formulation and implementation of foreign language textbook policies directly affect the development of the country's foreign language education industry, determine the direction of foreign language teaching, and thus affect the cultivation of foreign language talents. The research on foreign language education policies is particularly important and has become an important component of the discipline construction of foreign language education. Based on the analysis of existing research results, it is found that research on the "foreign language textbook policy" section still needs to be expanded. This study integrates and analyzes the foreign language textbook policies in basic education over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, in order to have a better understand of the development process and evolutionary characteristics. Hope this will be conducive to revise the curriculum outline and policies, write foreign language textbooks, and select content materials in the future, and to provide reference for further deepening China's curriculum reform and foreign language textbook construction.

2. Research Questions and Research Method

2.1. Research Questions

Since the reform and opening up, China's national strength and international discourse power have

been continuously improving, and the importance of foreign language education has become increasingly prominent; The textbook policy plays a fundamental, pioneering, and global role in guiding the direction of textbook construction and regulating the operation mechanism of textbooks^[2]. Sorting out the development process of primary and secondary school textbook policies over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, exploring the evolution characteristics of foreign language textbook policies, plays an important role in the policy of foreign language textbooks for basic education. Therefore, this study focuses on the following two issues:

(1) What is the development process of foreign language textbook policies in basic education since the reform and opening up?

(2) What are the characteristics of the evolution of foreign language textbook policies in basic education since the reform and opening up?

2.2. Research Method

This research mainly adopts content analysis method. The studies examined in this research are located through the following sources: the retrieving system on laws and regulations “PKULAW.COM”, official websites “the Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China” “the Central People’s Government”. A total of 204 documents, including policy documents, laws and regulations, and speeches from leaders, were collected. After reading each item, 162 documents and materials related to the textbook policies of basic education foreign language were finally determined and classified. Based on these materials, the foreign language textbook policies for basic education have been sorted out and analyzed.

3. Research Findings

By analyzing all collected policy materials, the study finally clarified the historical development process of elementary foreign language textbook policies and summarized their evolutionary characteristics.

3.1. Development Process

China’s foreign language textbook policies for primary and secondary schools have gone through four stages: restoration and reconstruction period, transition and development period, comprehensive construction period, and deepening reform period.

3.1.1. Recovery and Reconstruction Period (1978-1985)

During the Cultural Revolution, intellectuals went to the countryside and the education industry was deeply affected. In 1977, after the end of the Cultural Revolution, foreign language education, which had been deeply affected, was revitalized. In 1980, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Communist Party of China was held. Subsequently, in accordance with the spirit of relevant meetings, the education department issued the *Trial Draft of the Full-time Ten-Year English Teaching Syllabus for Primary and Secondary Schools* through multiple discussions and revisions. At this stage, the textbooks are compiled by the state, but due to the recent recovery of foreign language education, there is still a lack of relevant theoretical guidance and foreign language learning guidance in the compilation of foreign language textbooks. The high requirements for foreign language textbook learning have led to the problem of heavy learning burden on students. There is still no policy literature directly related to the writing and approval of foreign language textbooks.

3.1.2. Transition and Development Period (1986-2000)

The promulgation of the *Compulsory Education Law of the People’s Republic of China* in 1986 marked the reform of China’s textbook compilation and approval system. In September of the same year, the National Primary and Secondary School Textbook Approval Committee was officially established and issued the *Work Regulations of the National Primary and Secondary School Textbook Approval Committee*. It points out the need to establish an authoritative textbook review system. This indicates that China’s textbooks have shifted from national customization to approval system. In 1987, documents such as the *Standards for the Approval of Primary and Secondary School Textbooks* and the *Measures for the Submission of Primary and Secondary School Textbooks* were successively introduced, which made clearer requirements for the approval and submission of primary and secondary school textbooks^[3]. The

Working Regulations of the National Committee for the Approval of Primary and Secondary School Textbooks also mention “achieving diversification of textbooks with leadership and planning”, indicating that the development of primary and secondary school textbooks is moving towards diversification. In 1986, the *Full time Middle School English Teaching Outline* was promulgated, but foreign language textbooks were not revised, and teaching progress was adjusted according to actual situations in various regions.

In October 1996, in response to the new needs of social development, the National Education Commission conducted further discussions and demonstrations, and issued a new *Working Regulations of the National Primary and Secondary School Textbook Approval Committee*, in which textbooks were approved by the National Education Commission^[4]. Compared to 1987, the new regulations clearly emphasize the review of compulsory course materials. Previously, in 1992 and 1996, foreign language subject teaching outlines such as junior high school English teaching syllabus and senior high school English teaching syllabus were successively announced. Foreign language textbooks are further revised in accordance with the new teaching syllabus, textbook writing and approval requirements.

3.1.3. Comprehensive Construction Period (2001-2012)

This stage mainly focuses on the issue of educational equity, ensuring the quality of textbooks, and reducing textbook costs and prices. In terms of textbook prices, from adjusting textbook prices to publishing economical textbooks, and then providing free textbooks for compulsory education in impoverished areas. The central government allocates funds and purchases textbooks from the government to provide free textbooks for students from impoverished families in compulsory education in rural areas of central and western China. In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued the *Interim Measures for the Administration of the Writing and Approval of Primary and Secondary School Textbooks*, which stipulated that national curriculum textbooks should be written and approved by the education administrative department of the State Council, and local curriculum textbooks should be written and approved by provincial departments, encouraging the writing of distinctive textbooks^[5]. The compilation and approval of textbooks shall be completed by the national and local division of labor. In addition, encourage social organizations and the market to participate in the construction of foreign language textbooks.

In 2001, the *Experimental Plan for Compulsory Education Curriculum* was promulgated, gradually introducing foreign language courses in primary schools. In junior high school, foreign language science includes three types: English, Japanese, and Russian. Junior high school students can choose to learn one of these foreign languages. In 2003, the Ministry of Education issued the curriculum standards for English, Russian, and Japanese foreign language textbooks, emphasizing ideological, scientific, foundational, regular, developmental, and expansive aspects in textbook development.

3.1.4. Deepening Reform Period (2012-present)

Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, China has comprehensively promoted and deepened reforms. The *12th Five Year Plan for the Development of National Education* was officially promulgated in 2012. In this stage, we encourage and standardize socialized services, open up the textbook market in an orderly manner, improve product and service standards, and leverage the role of market mechanisms. In 2019, the *National Plan for the Construction of Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Schools (2019-2022)* and the *Measures for the Management of Textbooks for Primary and Secondary Schools* were released, which for the first time provided top-level design and systematic planning for the work of textbooks for primary and secondary schools^[6]. In 2021, multiple curriculum and textbook guidelines, including the *Guidelines for the Introduction of Revolutionary Traditions into Primary and Secondary Schools*, were issued, requiring foreign language textbooks to strengthen the presentation and integration of Chinese culture, labor education, and other aspects.

In 2017, 2020, and 2022, the Ministry of Education successively issued high school foreign language curriculum standards, revised versions of high school foreign language curriculum standards, and compulsory education foreign language curriculum standards. The content and activity design of textbooks aim to cultivate students' core competence. Through thematic discourse, English learning activity views, unit based teaching, and integrated “teaching learning evaluation” foreign language teaching concepts are adopted, combined with the requirements of foreign language disciplines, Emphasize the instrumental and humanistic nature of foreign languages, cultivate students' thinking qualities, and leverage the educational function of foreign languages. From the perspective of subject settings, high school foreign languages have increased from three languages (English, Japanese, and Russian) to six languages (English, Japanese, Russian, German, French, and Spanish). Foreign language teaching has diversified and developed. In addition, we will increase the proportion of presentation of

Chinese culture in the content of textbooks, shift the proportion of foreign culture from a large proportion in foreign language textbooks to a balanced proportion of multiculturalism, and improve students' core literacy in foreign language subjects through foreign language learning.

3.2. Evolution Characteristics

The research primarily investigates the main evolutionary characteristics of basic education foreign language textbook policies over the past forty years of reform and opening-up. This is achieved through analyzing specific policy texts related to the editing, publishing, selection, and languages of primary and secondary school basic education foreign language textbooks.

3.2.1. Textbook Editing: Prioritizing Social Development and Student Needs

In the early stages of reform and opening up, the Party and the state were committed to restoring and rebuilding teaching order, and attached great importance to textbook construction. Firstly, in 1977, a textbook guidance team was established, which clearly proposed the planning direction for primary and secondary school textbooks and the writing guidelines for textbooks for various disciplines. From 1978 to 1981, the nation successively published six volumes of primary school English textbooks, six volumes of junior high school English textbooks, and two volumes of senior high school English textbooks. These textbooks purged the ultra-leftist tendencies in foreign language teaching and emphasized the training of basic knowledge and fundamental skills^[7]. From 1978 to the end of the 20th century, the policy of writing foreign language textbooks advocated the cultivation of students' literacy in listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, and the improvement of their basic reading and writing abilities. During the textbook review process, it is necessary to ensure that the content embodies characteristics oriented towards modernity, international perspectives, and future development, while steadfastly adhering to the standards and principles of serving socialist modernization. Entering the 21st century, the policy for textbook editing and review began to shift towards a value orientation that emphasizes social development and student needs. The foreign language curriculum is people-oriented, aiming to cultivate comprehensive qualities in individuals. The *English Curriculum Standards for General High School (2003 Edition)* sets requirements for textbook editing principles, stating that textbook writing should be closely linked to social development, scientific progress, and students' life experiences^[8]. Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China, the Party and the state have repeatedly emphasized the educational value of foreign language courses. The *General Senior High School Curriculum Standards (2017 Edition, Revised 2020) of English, German, Russian* and other foreign language all emphasize that textbooks should actively and organically integrate socialist core values and the concept of a community with a shared future for humanity. At the same time, they focus on the individual needs of students, strictly adhere to the principles of language development based on capabilities, thereby fully demonstrating the value orientation of "Prioritizing Social Development and Student Needs."

3.2.2. Textbook Publishing: From Unified Management to Introducing Competitive Mechanisms

The evolution of foreign language textbook publishing in basic education can primarily be summarized as transitioning from centralized management to the introduction of competitive mechanisms. In the early stages of reform and opening up, the nation managed basic education textbooks centrally, establishing the Primary and Secondary School Foreign Language Editorial Office under the People's Education Press, which was designated to publish these textbooks exclusively. In the early 1990s, China began to introduce various policies, introducing market competition mechanisms for the first time in the publishing and distribution of basic education textbooks. The publication and distribution of these textbooks are mainly determined through bidding or other open methods. In 2001, the *Notice of Lowering the Prices of Primary and Secondary School Textbooks and Deepening the Reform of the Textbook Management System*, which was published by the General Office of the State Council on Forwarding the Opinions of the Economic System Reform Office and Other Departments, clearly stated: "Deepen the reform of the textbook publishing and distribution system, break monopolies, and introduce competitive mechanisms."^[9] In order to address the thorny issues in the reform process, in March 2005, the State Council approved the expansion of bidding pilot projects. After three months, the revised versions of the *Implementation Measures for Pilot Tendering and Bidding of Primary and Secondary School Textbook Publishing* and the *Implementation Measures for Pilot Tendering and Bidding of Primary and Secondary School Textbook Publishing* released. In addition to the People's Education Press, other publishing houses such as Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, and others also began to participate in the publishing of foreign language textbooks. Driven by the competitive mechanism, publishers started to focus on the quality of textbooks. The principle of standardized publishing and distribution qualifications is also reflected in the

Regulations on Textbooks in Basic Education issued in 2019. Publishing and distribution units must first obtain the corresponding qualifications before they can publish and distribute textbooks.

3.2.3. Textbook Selection: From Using Unified Textbooks to Choosing as Needed

Since the implementation of the reform and opening-up policy 40 years ago, China's strategy for selecting foreign language textbooks for basic education has gradually evolved from using unified textbooks to choosing textbooks as needed. During the initial stage of reform and opening up from 1978 to 1985, primary and secondary schools across the country used national unified textbooks. The textbooks during this period reflect the unified standards and requirements for foreign language teaching at the national level. This ensures consistency in education nationwide, but also limits the diversity and innovation of local education. With the deepening of China's reform and opening up and international exchanges, foreign language teaching is gradually emphasizing diversity and practicality. Starting from the late 1990s, local education departments and schools gained more freedom in choosing textbooks. During this period, diverse textbooks published by different publishers began to emerge in the market, and different regions and schools could choose suitable textbooks based on their own characteristics and needs. The 2011 edition of the *English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education* clearly states that schools can appropriately use high-quality teaching materials from both domestic and foreign sources or develop and use school-based textbooks^[10]. In 2014, the *Interim Measures for the Management of the Textbooks Selection in Basic Education* proposed requirements for the standardization of textbook selection, "the selection units of primary and secondary school textbooks should be confirmed by the provincial education administrative department based on the local substantive situation, and when selecting textbooks, a textbook selection committee should be established to be specifically responsible for the selection of textbooks."^[11] Since the beginning of the 21st century, China's foreign language textbook policies for basic education have placed greater emphasis on balancing diversity and personalization. On the one hand, the country still guides teaching through curriculum standards to ensure the quality of education; On the other hand, encourage local governments and schools to choose or develop suitable textbooks based on actual situations.

3.2.4. Types of Foreign Languages: From "Single" to "Diverse"

With the development of reform and opening up, foreign language textbooks in China have changed from single language to multiple language. After the founding of New China, foreign language learning shifted from Russian to English. Since 2001, foreign language courses have been gradually opened in primary schools, and basic education foreign languages include English, Russian and Japanese. By 2017, German, French and Spanish have been added to the foreign language courses in high schools, and related textbooks have been added to diversify the language of textbooks. This reflects the diversified development of foreign language education in China, meets the needs of further economic and social development of our country, and meets the needs of individual development of students.

4. Implication

4.1. Clarifying the Guiding Ideology of Foreign Language Textbook Policies

The foreign language textbook policy is a part of China's basic education policy, which should conform with the requirements of national educational development. Clarifying the guiding ideology of foreign language textbook policy has an important influence on the development of basic education. Firstly, in both society and individuals, the formulation of foreign language textbook policies should be consistent with socialist core values, and while promoting social development, attention should also be paid to the individual development of students. Secondly, it is necessary to allocate educational resources based on practical foundations, so as to allocate the utility value of education reasonably, and ensure the internal unity and consistency of fairness and efficiency. Finally, textbook policies should also take into account both scientific and ideological guiding principles, and have the functions of transmitting scientific knowledge and inheriting excellent Chinese culture, improving civic moral literacy, and promoting the comprehensive development of students.

4.2. Strengthening the Value Orientation of Foreign Language Textbook

Foreign language textbook should move from surface to depth, Promote the learning of excellent cultures both domestically and internationally, and achieve the educational value of the subject. At the macro level, the value orientation of foreign language textbook should be based on the goal of cultivating

discipline talents, innovating talent cultivation models and teaching methods to cultivate innovative talents in the new era, and achieving the mission of “subject education” and “moral education”. At the micro level, based on the characteristics of Chinese education in the new era and the development needs of individuals, clarifying the relationship between instrumental and humanistic aspects, developing foreign language teaching design guided by core competencies in foreign language disciplines, establishing the concept of promoting whole-person development, integrating morality, intelligence, physical fitness, beauty, labor, and mind into foreign language textbook design, cultivating students’ correct attitudes and values towards life, and promoting their comprehensive development.

4.3. Optimizing the Review Mechanism for Foreign Language Textbooks

Foreign language teaching material policy is not only a key part of China’s teaching material policy, but also a core way for the country to lead the development of foreign language education. Therefore, the assessment of foreign language teaching material policy needs to pay attention to its reasonableness, fairness and effectiveness, and constantly optimize the review mechanism of foreign language teaching materials. Establish a mechanism for review and feedback and improvement, and diversify the diverse review team. Make good use of the forces of schools, teachers, students, parents and society in supervision and evaluation, collect feedback on the use of textbooks, regularly adjust and update textbooks according to the feedback; at the same time, establish and improve relevant supervision organizations to ensure that textbooks are comprehensively evaluated from different angles and ensure a virtuous cycle of textbook policy formulation and implementation.

5. Conclusions

Looking back, under the leadership of the Party, textbook policies have become increasingly scientific and standardized. Based on this survey, we have summarized the development process of foreign language textbook policies in primary and secondary schools in China over the past 40 years of reform and opening up, which includes four stages: restoration and reconstruction period, transition and development period, comprehensive construction period, and deepening reform period. At the same time, it also clarifies its different evolutionary characteristics in four aspects: textbook editing, textbook publishing, textbook selection, and types of foreign languages. Since the reform and opening up, textbook editing and review have gradually placed equal emphasis on both social development and student needs; it had unified management and then introduced competitive mechanisms in textbook publishing; In terms of textbook selection, it has evolved from “using unified textbooks” to “choosing textbooks as need”; On types of foreign languages, foreign language textbooks in our country have also moved from a single language to multiple languages.

Based on the above research, some implications have also been gained, which are to adhere to the value orientation of foreign language textbook policies in China, clarify the value orientation of foreign language textbook, and optimize the foreign language textbook review mechanism. It is hoped that this can provide some reference for the formulation and implementation of foreign language textbook policies in China in the future.

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