

The Development of China's English Education Policy in Primary and Middle Schools Within the Framework of Language-In-Education Planning (From 1949 To 2023)

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Abstract. With the burgeoning prevalence of the English language on a global scale, one of the central foci of language-in-education planning research lies in the escalating influence of English on the educational frameworks of virtually all nations worldwide. The intensifying forces of globalization and cultural diversity have contributed to an augmented need for individuals with exceptional levels of English proficiency. Faced with English's preeminence in contemporary society, governments have recognized the critical importance of English instruction in primary and middle schools as a composition of their language-in-education planning. The paper highlights China's English education policy in elementary and secondary schools during the last 50 years. and points out that the evolution of primary and middle school English education has been a process of constant adjusting and modification under the impact of different elements, including national politics, the economy, diplomacy, and society. Based on the characteristics and problems of foreign language education in China today, this paper proposes that policy formulation should increase the participation of local levels, the scope and the depth of the policy content and should also strengthen the supervision and support of policy implementation.

Keywords: Language-in-education planning, China's English education policy, English teaching in primary and secondary schools.

1. Introduction

Language education has always been a vital component of a country's education system [1]. English, as a foreign language, has an important place in education in China's elementary and middle schools. As China develops and opens up, English language education policies have gone through years of change and adjustment. Within the framework of language-in-education planning, this study will analyze the evolution of English education policy in Chinese primary and middle schools from 1949 to 2023. Changes in primary and middle English language education policies reflect the importance China attaches to language education and its efforts to align itself with international standards. This paper will review the development of English language education policy in China, analyze the important changes and policy adjustments, and examine the impact of these changes on English education in primary and middle schools. Understanding the changes in the evolution of English education policies in Chinese elementary and middle schools, this paper can provide a better understanding of the pulse of development in this field and provide a reference for future educational reform and policy formulation. At the same time, the impact of China's English education policies on students' language proficiency development and international communication can be assessed so that constructive comments and suggestions can be made. This paper is intended to provide useful insights and suggestions for supporting the growth of English education in Chinese elementary and middle schools.

2. Theoretical Frameworks

Language-in-education planning entails a systematic organization and management of language utilization and instruction within a country or region to attain specific social, cultural, economic, and political objectives [2]. It encompasses not only the language itself but also its intricate connections

with various social, historical, cultural, political, and economic factors, demanding a comprehensive consideration of diverse stakeholders' needs and expectations [3]. As globalization advances, English, as an international lingua franca, assumes a pivotal role in China's international exchange and cooperation. Consequently, English education policies in Chinese primary and middle education have garnered substantial attention and discussion. This paper will analyze the developmental history, key features, and challenges of English education policies in Chinese primary and middle schools under the purview of language-in-education planning and put forward some suggestions for improvement.

3. China's Policy and Historical Changes in English Language Teaching in Primary and Middle Schools from 1949 to 2023

Since 1949, English education in China has experienced a tortuous development. Fu Ke and Li Liangyou provided an informative introduction to English education in China before the 1880s [4,5]. But they have not yet further summarized the characteristics of each period. Prof. Lu Ziwen [6] classified the practical activities of English education in China into four time periods, including the ideology-dominated period (1949-1971), the structuralism-dominated period (1972-1990), the functionalism-dominated period (1990-2020), and the humanism-dominated period (after 2020). Prof. Lu Ziwen's categorization is more convincing than considering only Chinese political factors [6] (Figure 1).

Table 1. Periodic division of English education policies in Chinese primary and middle schools [6]

Year	Period
1949-1971	Ideology-dominated Period
1972-1990	Structuralism-dominated Period
1991-2020	Functionalism-dominated Period
2020-future	Humanism-dominated Period

3.1. Ideology-dominated Period (1949-1971)

Based on international political needs, foreign language education in China was dominated by Russian language education during this period, and English language education was deserted [7]. The Ministry of Education of the P.R.C. produced the Draft Teaching Plan for Middle Schools in August 1950, which stated that "foreign languages should be offered in junior and senior high schools, and if possible, Russian language should be offered." In the limited English education, there were strong ideological epitomes in the syllabus, course objectives, teaching materials, etc [8]. In May 1966, when the "Cultural Revolution" began, basic education and teaching were out of order and the objectives of the foreign language courses were directed to politics, and political slogans were the main content of the English courses [9]. During this time, English education in Chinese primary and middle schools was influenced by domestic and foreign political factors, with ups and downs, lacking stability and continuity.

3.2. Structuralism-dominated Period (1972-1990)

China's relationship with the Soviet Union gradually deteriorated in the early 1970s which affected the teaching of Russian in China's foreign language policy, reducing the emphasis on Russian and focusing more on Western languages such as English. After 1978, China began to execute a policy of reform and external opening, attracting foreign capital and introducing advanced technology. China gradually emphasized the study of Western languages such as English to meet the needs of communication with capitalist countries, to strengthen economic cooperation, and the ability to absorb advanced technology from abroad. At the same time, the importance of other languages such as Russian has relatively diminished. The promotion of economic modernization and the open-door policy led China to take foreign language education as an important means of enhancing economic competitiveness and promoting international cooperation. In March 1979, the Ministry of Education

of the P.R.C. issued the Several Opinions on Strengthening Foreign Language Education [10]. The main spirit of the Opinions is that " Foreign language classes in middle schools, like language and mathematics courses, are vital foundational subjects that should be prioritized [11]." At the same time, the Opinions suggested that "the layout of languages should have a strategic vision and long-term planning, and suggested that the main task at present is to vigorously develop English education."

3.3. Functionalism-dominated Period (1991-2020)

With the intensification of globalization since the 1990s, China achieved a rapid economic rise during this period and gradually became the second-largest economy in the world. China's increased international status has made English an important tool for business, cultural and political exchanges with other countries and regions. China has strengthened its emphasis on English education, focusing on cultivating talents with good English skills to meet the needs of business, cultural, scientific, technological, and academic exchanges with other countries and regions. Primary and middle English education plays a significant role in China's education system to facilitate international cooperation, enhance international competitiveness and promote economic development. During this period, English teaching in primary and middle schools in China was driven by reform and opening up and economic development and began to emphasize the role of English as a tool for international communication. In May 1985, The Chinese government announced a decision on education system reform. According to this decision, the National Education Commission developed the obligatory education teaching plan and launched a new curriculum reform, starting with the development of the nine-year compulsory education syllabus and the promulgation of the Curriculum Plan for Primary School and Junior Middle School (for Trial Implementation) [11]. The syllabus and teaching materials follow functionalism, the classroom is oriented towards language useability, language skills teaching is the main focus, and the NCEE and the middle school examination begin to test listening ability and even speaking ability. The English curriculum undertakes the task of improving pupils' full humanistic literacy. humanistic literacy [12].

3.4. Humanism-dominated Period (2020-future)

After 2020, the global economic pattern changed, the rise of emerging markets and developing countries had an impact on the global balance of power, and China played an important role in this change. During this period, English education in Chinese primary and middle schools was influenced by quality education and humanistic education and began to focus on cultivating students' comprehensive language skills and cross-cultural communication skills, and some new English education policies were introduced. The English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education (2022 Edition) states that "to form a sense of cross-cultural communication and basic cross-cultural communication skills, to further broaden the international perspective, and to enhance the spirit of patriotism and nationalism [13]." In addition, the new standard highlights the nurturing orientation of the elementary and middle school English curriculum, stating, "The starting point and ending point of the English curriculum for compulsory education is to cultivate newcomers of the times with ideals, skills, and responsibilities."

3.5. Findings and Suggestions

Over the past decades, the development of English education in China's primary and middle schools has been a process of continuous adjustment and adaptation under the influence of various factors, such as the country's political and economic diplomacy as well as society. China's English education policies in primary and middle schools are characterized by the following features. First, policymakers are mainly education departments and expert committees at the national level, with less participation at the local and grassroots levels, resulting in a possible disconnect between policies and the actual situation. Second, policy content is mainly focused on curriculum standards, examination systems, and teacher training, lacking in the consideration of other influencing factors, such as social needs, cultural differences, resource allocation, etc.; teaching materials still focus mainly on defining

vocabulary and grammatical concepts, ignoring discourse, pragmatics, and themes, weak humanities education, single skill training, and fragmentation of knowledge in classroom teaching [14]. Thirdly, there are various difficulties and challenges in the process of policy implementation, the implementation of the concept of the new standard is not in place, and there is a split between teachers' teaching practice and the concept of the new standard [15]. Such as unclear understanding and communication of the policy, insufficient implementation of the policy, and inadequate evaluation and feedback mechanism of the policy.

Given the problems associated with English education programs in Chinese primary and middle schools, this paper puts forward the following suggestions for improvement: First, In the process of compiling the English policy participation at the local and grassroots levels should be increased, and the opinions and suggestions of all parties to formulate policies that are more in line with the actual situation and needs should be taken into consideration. Second, the scope and depth of the policy content needs to be expand and policy makers should pay attention not only to the goals and contents of English education, but also to the process and effects of English education, and the links and impacts of English education with other fields; Third, policy makers should strengthen the supervision and support for policy implementation, clarify the responsibilities and obligations for policy implementation, provide guidance and training for policy implementation, and set up an evaluation and feedback mechanism for policy implementation, so as to adjust and improve policies in a timely manner.

4. Conclusion

English education policy in Chinese primary and middle education is a dynamic, complex, and multifaceted issue. Over the past decades, the development of English language education in China's primary and middle schools is a process of continuous adjustment and adaptation under the influence of various factors, such as the country's politics, economy, diplomacy, and society. Comprehensive, in-depth, and systematic analysis and evaluation within the perspective of language-in-education planning are needed, as well as continuous, timely, and effective reforms and innovations in accordance with the development of the times and the needs of the students, in order to raise the quality and level of English education in Chinese elementary and middle schools.

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