

# The Changes of Foreign Language Education Policies in Chinese Higher Education From 1949 To 1977

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**Abstract.** Since the reconstruction of China after the serious destruction caused by long-lasting wars, many aspects of Chinese society are influenced greatly including the education aspect. Specifically, the foreign language education field is also under great impact of many factors in terms of political and diplomatic aspects. This paper reviews the foreign language education policies (FLEP) in Chinese higher education at the beginning of the foundation of new China. This review is divided into four parts: the explanation of the study's background and significance, an introduction of theoretical basis, a detailed inspection of specific foreign language education policies and some influencing factors, followed by some conclusions including some possible suggestions from the previous analysis and review. From the review of former studies and the analysis of some specific FLEP, an overall conclusion will be drawn. FLEP in Chinese higher education has not been researched in a comprehensive way, especially in the first three decades. This review aims to detect the changing trend of FLEP in the given period and some factors from both domestic and international environments, which hopes to offer some inspiration to the related subjects.

**Keywords:** education policies; foreign language education policies; Chinese higher education.

## 1. Introduction

In many national contexts, the increasing need for individual foreign language competence and skills to incorporate the country's economic development of the broader community is predominately expressed through foreign language education policies [1]. To elaborate, the emphasis on English learning is increasing rapidly, including the national investment, growing teaching time as well as expanding the use of English as instruction media [2]. Spolsky mentioned in his book that foreign language education policy has indispensable significance for a country in three aspects: multilingualism, cultural understanding and economic status [3]. Ricento explored the relationships between foreign language education policy and political theories and emphasized its importance in promoting social justice, cultural diversity and inclusive citizenship [4].

Overall, it can be seen that foreign language education policies have vital effects on a country in terms of economy, cultural diversity and some social benefits. Therefore, it is worth reviewing and detecting the changing trend of foreign language education policies due to it can offer certain reference value to the related entities. The rest of the paper will be divided into three parts. Firstly, some theories about the topic will be put forward. Secondly, the analysis of the changes in foreign language education policies in Chinese higher education is based on previous empirical research. Lastly, some conclusions will be proposed.

## 2. Theoretical Basis

This paper is based on the language policy put forward by Robert. L Cooper in 1989. He argued that foreign language education policies and planning can be analyzed from eight aspects: Who is the policy maker? Which behavior will be influenced by the policy? What is the motivation behind the policy? The circumstances of the policy? What is the way of policymaking? What is the decision-making process? The last one is the implementation effect of the policy. This analyzing model has basically covered the whole process of policymaking and the content which can be greatly incorporated into this paper [5]. The analysis of FLEP in the following part will be based on this

theory but not entirely keep to its sequence and certain principles as some answers cannot be found in the existing research.

### 3. The Changes of FLEP in Chinese Higher Education from 1949 to 1977

This paper will discuss the changes in FLEP in Chinese higher education in this period according to the partition criteria raised by Li and Dai [6,7]. The given period will be discussed in three different phases (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Time phases

Years	Period
1949 to 1956	Initial period
1957 to 1966	Adjusting period
1966 to 1977	Plateau period

#### 3.1. The Initial Period (1949 to 1956)

According to Li, the FLEP in this period was predominated by the Soviet Union since the political environment where the whole country's development including the education system was influenced by the Soviet Union. Besides, due to the people's resentment of Americans' military action towards North Korea, English learning gradually disappeared in the classroom until 1956 [6]. What's more, a distinctive characteristic of Chinese foreign policy in this period was one-sided policy, which means China mainly established relationships with socialist countries and the Soviet Union was the country that China valued the most as the Soviet Union offered a lot of aid in terms of military, economy, and education as well as other aspects [8]. As to the international environment, China was suppressed by the western capitalist countries led by the United States. Hence, China could only develop its economy with the help of the Soviet Union. All these factors led to the changes of FLEP in higher education, which Russia was encouraged greatly in all regions to bridge the communication with the Soviet Union.

The specific FLEP in this period was the Decision on the readjustment of the departments of Education, English, Physical Education and Politics in Higher Normal schools was introduced by the Ministry of Education in 1953 [9]. This policy stipulated that Huadong University was the only higher education institution that could reserve an English department [10]. It clearly showed that other foreign languages education was restricted except Russian due to political preferences. Almost all students and teachers are required to learn Russian to respond to the call of the country and in accordance with the political environment. It even appeared the situation where there were not enough Russian textbooks and teachers had to translate and develop textbooks while teaching [11].

Overall, at the beginning of new China, foreign language education in higher education institutions was predominated by Russian instead of other foreign languages.

#### 3.2. The Adjusting Period (1957 to 1966)

Due to the previous FLEP, the Chinese government found that there were so many Russian talents that it caused the talent glut phenomenon [12]. Another factor behind this period was Great Leap Forward Movement in 1958. This movement was caused by leftist deviation among national leaders and almost all aspects of Chinese society were developed at an astonishing and unrealistic pace. Combined with these factors, China required a great demand for foreign language talents that was not just confined to Russian [7]. Apart from that, in 1960, China split with the Soviet Union because of disagreements in many significant policy fields especially in economic growth, international relationships as well as ideology [9]. As to the international environment, President Mao realized China should establish relationships with other foreign countries and broke the lockdown of some western countries. A significant breakthrough happened in 1964, China built diplomatic relationships with France, which poses a great challenge to the isolation and containment of China headed by America and the Soviet Union [10].

To respond to all these influences, in 1964, the Outline of Seven-year Plan was discussed by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, State Council, Office of Culture and Education, State Planning Commission, Ministry of Higher Education, Ministry of Education and promulgated in the same year [7]. In this policy, China stipulated that higher education institutions should introduce other foreign languages like English, Russian, German, French and Japanese, and most importantly, English should be the top priority in higher education. Since then, English had replaced Russian becoming the first choice of most Chinese higher education institutions. More and more students started to learn English instead of Russian due to the change in related policies.

All in all, this change could be ascribed to the social reality, domestic leftism, and international relationships with other countries.

### 3.3. The Plateau Period (1967-1977)

This period was known as Cultural Revolution in Chinese history. At the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, all aspects of Chinese society were splashed hard. It put a halt to all levels of higher education which was attributed to all forms of anti-communist activities from all walks of lives [13]. During this special period, almost all foreign languages learning was severely influenced and criticized violently by all people [9]. It can be seen from some radical slogans like, “I’m Chinese, do not learn English”, and “Don’t learn ABC, still do revolution”. To respond to this serious issue, the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC) promulgated a policy--Circular of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China on the Decentralization of Higher Education Institutions. In this policy, China stipulated many colleges should be consolidated and English departments should be decreased [7].

However, this is not the whole situation in the following period. In the following years, China made some breakthroughs on the international stage. In 1971, China regained its power and position in the United Nations. In addition to that, the next year, the president of the United States visited China. Overall, in the later stage of this period, China made some breakthroughs on the international stage, which maintained a constant demand for English talents and other foreign languages’ intelligence rather than completely descending into a dark age.

The general changes and influencing factors are listed below (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** General overview

Period	Feature	Influencing factors
Initial period	Dominated by Russian	One-sided policy
Adjusting period	Revival of English	Great Leap Forward Sino-soviet rupture China-France diplomatic relations
Plateau period	Destruction of English	Cultural Revolution

## 4. Conclusion

The most distinctive feature of FLEP in Chinese higher education during the period was gradually transforming single foreign language education to multiple languages education. Another major change was English had replaced Russian becoming the dominant foreign language during the first two periods. However, due to the special political movement, foreign language education was significantly splashed and remained stagnant for nearly ten years. It can be seen that all FLEPs mentioned in the paper were under the influence of the political environment from both domestic and international. From the diplomatic preference towards the Soviet Union after the foundation of new China and the block of western countries to the serve destructive movement within the country, the Chinese government constantly adjusted the FLEP to meet the political changes and demands of foreign language talents.

Based on these changes in FLEP, there are some suggestions being offered to the related subjects. When making FLEP of higher education institutions, policy-making departments and the Ministry of

Education should take social reality, especially international changes into consideration. If the whole environment does not need certain foreign language talents, the country should adjust current policies and encourage other language learning like the Road and Belt Initiative has encouraged the learning of some minor languages of the countries along the “silk road”.

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