

Comparative Research of Foreign Language Teaching of Primary and Secondary Schools in China and Russia

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Abstract. The world today is undergoing a period of fast development and big changes, with the emergence of a more and more multi-polarization world and the in-depth development of economic globalization, the rapid advancement of science and technology, and the increasingly fierce competition for talents. Therefore, all countries in the world regard creating a world-first-class education system and enhancing their competitiveness in education as their strategic goals. Among that, foreign language education is especially important as the basis for building a bridge of communication between countries in the era of globalization. China and Russia have always maintained close cooperation in the fields of politics, economy, culture, and education. The two countries are always communicating and learning from each other. This article focuses on foreign language teaching in primary and secondary schools in China and Russia. By analyzing important documents, teaching materials, and teaching methods in the field of foreign language education in China and Russia since the beginning of the 21st century, it compares and summarizes the similarities and differences, advantages and disadvantages of foreign language teaching in the two countries. The results show that the fertility of foreign language course settings and the literature-oriented learning material promote foreign language teaching in Russia. This helps provide some experiences for future policy designers, textbook writers, and teachers in primary and secondary schools' foreign language teaching fields in other countries.

Keywords: Comparative education; Foreign language teaching; Secondary education.

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, both China and Russia experienced revolutions in economy, politics, culture, and education. Scholars in both countries contributed time and energy to help find out suitable and best ways to foreign language teaching.

The current Chinese educational system is based on the Soviet model, starting from the funding of the PRC in 1949. Since 1978, communication between China and western countries has been increasing steadily with the implementation of the Reform and Opening Up policy, and foreign language education has developed rapidly. Under the promotion of the Ministry of Education, schools, and even foreign language training institutions, foreign language learning has experienced unprecedented upsurges. However, since 2014, there have been endless debates about withdrawing English from the college entrance examination in China. According to the 2022 edition of the Compulsory Education Curriculum Plan and Curriculum Standards issued by the Ministry of Education, the proportion of foreign language subjects in the 9-year compulsory education is only 6% to 8%, which is far lower than that of Chinese (20% to 22%) and it is even lower than art (9%~11%) [1].

English was introduced into Russia during the tsarist period. In the 18th and 19th centuries, with more frequent communication with countries such as the UK and the United States, the status of English in Russia gradually improved. However, during the Cold War, the Soviet Union was isolated and blocked by capitalist countries, which hindered the spread of English. Due to the lack of opportunities for ordinary people to learn and use English, the establishment of a stable foreign language education system could not be realized until the disintegration of the Soviet Union. After that, the dissemination of English and foreign language education finally ushered in a climax in Russia. The Russian education department then formulated foreign language learning and teaching plans and curriculum arrangements for primary and middle school students.

Since 2000, Russia has successively promulgated documents such as Letter on Learning Foreign Languages in General Educational Institutions and National General Education Standards (Federal Part) Foreign Language Curriculum Standards in Basic General Education Stage [2]. In recent years, foreign language learning has become more and more popular in Russia [3]. More and more people of all ages and all walks of life start to pick up foreign languages. According to the results of English language proficiency tests (TOEFL, IELTS, etc.) for non-English-speaking countries in English-speaking countries, the average English level of Russian English learners in the new century has always been good.

In today's era, to strengthen communication with the international community, to understand different cultures, and to spread national treasures, a large number of advanced foreign language learners should be cultivated, and a well-constructed foreign language teaching system is the basis for cultivating excellent cross-cultural talents. Thus, foreign language education should be placed in a prominent position and reforms should be constantly carried out to improve our current language teaching.

This paper analyzes the national foreign language teaching documents promulgated by the Ministry of Education of China and Russia in the new century, compares the content and characteristics of foreign language teaching materials in the two countries, and discusses the teaching methods of primary and secondary schools in the information age. Effective foreign language teaching methods are thus concluded by analyzing the similarities and differences of the research subjects above, which may provide suggestions for the subsequent reform of foreign language teaching.

2. Curriculum Standards for Foreign Language Teaching in China and Russia

2.1. In China

Since the beginning of the new century, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China has promulgated and revised several plans for the primary and secondary school curriculum and foreign language curriculum standards. Some adjustments have been made to the subject setting and schedule of foreign language teaching.

For compulsory education, in January 2001, the General Office of the Ministry of Education issued the Guiding Opinions of the Ministry of Education on Actively Promoting English Courses in Primary Schools, the basic goal of which will be to realize "starting from the autumn of 2001, English courses will be gradually offered in primary schools in cities and counties across the country; and in the autumn of 2002, English courses will be gradually offered in primary schools in townships [4]." The Experimental Program for Compulsory Education Curriculum Setting promulgated in November of the same year stipulates that foreign language courses in primary schools generally start from the third grade, and foreign language subjects account for 6-8% of the total class hours of nine-year compulsory education, which is about 571-762 class hours (lessons). The language types of foreign language courses in junior high school can be selected from English, Japanese, Russian, and other languages. Foreign language schools or other qualified schools can offer a second foreign language [5]. The Compulsory Education Curriculum Plan promulgated in April 2022 inherited the 2001 edition in terms of class hours and foreign language types. Ordinary schools can still choose one of the English, Japanese, Russian and other foreign languages for teaching, although most schools still only offer English courses [1].

In contrast, foreign language teaching in high school has undergone more obvious changes in the past two decades. The Full-time Ordinary Senior High School Curriculum Plan (Experimental Revised Draft) promulgated in 2000 stipulates that the total time of English courses in the three years of senior high school is 384 class hours, accounting for about 15% of the total class hours of compulsory courses, which is on par with Chinese [6]. In 2003, the Ordinary Senior High School Curriculum Plan (Experiment) made some adjustments to this, changing the required credits to 10 points, accounting for about 9% of the total required credits [7]. Although the new plan no longer

regulates specific class hours, the proportion of credits can also reflect the number of class hours. A new round of ordinary high school curriculum revision work began in 2013, forming the General High School Curriculum Plan (2017 Edition, 2020 Revision). This is the first time since the new century that there has been a change in the planned language types taught in schools. On the basis of English, Japanese, Russian, German, French, and Spanish have been added to the list. The compulsory credits of foreign language subjects account for about 7% of the total required credits at this stage [8].

2.2. In Russia

Since the 21st century, foreign language education in Russia seems to be gradually weakened. Since 2004, English has become a compulsory subject in Russian primary schools. This can also be proved by the Federal State General Education Standards of Primary Stage promulgated by the Ministry of Education and Science of Russia in 2010: foreign languages (including the first foreign language and the second foreign language) are compulsory subjects, from the primary education stage (1-4 grades). It begins in the second year of school, and there are two class hours per week in the second to fourth grades [9]. At the stage of basic general education (grades 5-9), the proportion of foreign language courses (including first foreign language and second foreign language) has increased, and there are at least 3 class hours per week [10]. However, the Education Standards of Secondary Stage passed in 2020 changed foreign language into an optional subject in the national unified examination. Before that, English, Russian, and mathematics were all compulsory subjects [11]. According to the latest education standards, starting from September 1, 2022, the second foreign language will no longer be a compulsory course at the stage of basic general education in Russia. Although the spokesperson of the Ministry of Education said that the new regulations will not reduce the foreign language proficiency of Russian students, without mandatory time investment and external supervision, it is difficult for Russian primary and secondary school students to improve their foreign language proficiency.

As for foreign language course settings, the Russian Ministry of Education has not clearly announced the foreign language languages taught in primary and secondary schools, but English, German, French, and Spanish have always been popular choices for students. Since the Chinese entered the college entrance examination in 2019, this language has also become a popular choice for Russian primary and secondary school students. By the end of 2018, as many as 31 foreign languages have been offered in primary and secondary schools across Russia.

3. Characteristics of Foreign Language Textbooks in the Two Countries

3.1. In China

At the turn of the century, a new round of curriculum reform was launched, and major changes took place in foreign language education in China. With the promulgation of the Basic Education Curriculum Reform Outline (Trial) in 2001, the country has successively started the formulation of English curriculum standards. In the following years, a series of documents to guide basic English education was published: Full-time Compulsory Education, English Curriculum Standards for General Middle Schools (Experimental Draft) (2001 Edition), General High School English Curriculum Standards (Experimental Draft) (2003 edition), English Curriculum Standards of Compulsory Education (2011 edition), Ordinary Senior High School English Curriculum Standards (2017 edition), etc [12]. With the strong encouragement of the country, a large number of well-produced English teaching materials have emerged, such as the new target English teaching materials published by People's Education Press, the new standard series of English teaching materials launched by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, and the Oxford English series textbooks published jointly by Phoenix Publishing and Media Group and Yilin Publishing House. Compared with the previous textbooks, the newly edited textbooks of these major publishing houses have undergone great changes in the teaching system, teaching content, activity design, and teaching

evaluation, which better reflect the new teaching philosophy [13,14]. In addition, the introduction and application of original textbooks such as the Oxford Reading Tree Good English series also provide more authentic and interesting reading materials for Chinese primary and middle school students and other English learners.

3.2. In Russia

Foreign language courses in Russia are highly literary-oriented. They prefer textbooks with a dedicated literature section (such as Objectives, Spotlight, and Starlight), which not only contain works originally published on average more than a century ago but also have the most recent long literary texts. But at the same time, the textbook also fully considers the age and interests of the students, choosing hot topics that primary and middle school students are curious about, and inserting a variety of illustrations to attract students' attention [15].

4. Foreign Language Teaching Approaches in Both Countries

4.1. In China

Since the beginning of the 21st century, driven by the wave of informatization characterized by digitalization, networking, and intelligence, promoting the deep integration of information technology and education has become a hot spot in the current education and teaching reform. Educational Informatization Action 2.0 (2018) emphasizes that "information technology and intelligent technology should be deeply integrated into the whole process of education, to promote teaching, management, and student achievement." China hopes to use convenient means and rich learning resources in the near future to change the traditional teacher-centered classroom structure, promote the transformation of teaching methods, and give full play to students' initiative, enthusiasm, and creativity. With the support of information technology, the foreign language teaching features of wide coverage, extensive sharing of resources, transcending time and space constraints, multi-directional interaction, and easy collaboration are highlighted.

In the past ten years, many schools in China have tried to apply MOOCs, flipped classrooms, micro-classes, smart classrooms, and online classrooms to English teaching, and have also developed English listening, speaking, reading, and writing courses with their characteristics. In-class, extra-curricular, online, and offline together constitute the English learning environment in the information age, which greatly enriches the English course resources, comprehensively improves the efficiency and quality of classroom teaching, and becomes an important way to train qualified foreign language talents in the new era.

But as far as the whole country is concerned, the vast majority of primary and secondary schools in China still use the traditional foreign language teaching method, that is, lecturing, and the teaching mode is mainly based on grammar teaching.

4.2. In Russia

Russia's traditional foreign language teaching methods are similar to those in China. Grammar explanation, text translation, classroom discussion, and listening and speaking are all commonly used methods in the classroom [16]. Since the new century, teaching methods such as Community Language Learning, Computer Assisted Language Learning, Consciousness-raising approach, and Task-based learning have also been applied to teaching.

5. Discussion

Judging from the foreign language curriculum standard documents for primary and secondary schools of the two countries, there is still a big gap between China and Russia in terms of foreign language curriculum setting. Although English is not stipulated as a single foreign language subject in China's curriculum standards, the number of schools offering courses in other languages has always

been small due to the shortage of high-quality foreign language talents and the imperfect foreign language examination mechanism. Even foreign language schools often limit the languages offered to English, Russian, German, French, Japanese, and Spanish. However, in Chinese universities, there are more than one hundred kinds of foreign language majors. The missing transition means that many college students majoring in foreign languages lack a systematic understanding of the foreign language majors they are about to study before entering university. Thus, in the process of learning, many students find that their majors are not suitable for them.

From the perspective of the content of teaching materials, the existing foreign language teaching materials in primary and middle schools in China are often based on basic knowledge such as vocabulary and grammar, while texts are mainly short dialogues, practical passages, and other articles focusing on daily topics, while literary texts can hardly be seen or are completely missing [17]. Although in recent years, more and more schools have purchased additional reading materials for students or displayed original foreign language books in the school library. But considering the great number of class hours and heavy tasks Chinese primary and middle school students have, and the lack of supervision in the form of tests of the content of those reading materials, students seldom spend time and energy on extra foreign language reading. Therefore, it becomes more and more difficult to improve their foreign language ability at a higher level. And students often can only complete writing tasks through short and dull narratives, and often lack practical arguments since they cannot find supporting evidence from books or lack the accumulation of relevant corpus.

The choice of Russian literary textbooks makes the foreign language classes in primary and secondary schools more closely connected to the university lectures. Students are influenced by foreign language classics since childhood, and learn foreign languages in the native speakers' way. Over time, they can develop the mindset to think about problems in foreign languages. Some students became interested in a certain work or a certain writer during middle school, found their future professional direction, and laid the foundation for engaging in related research.

In terms of teaching approaches applied in the new century, there is no essential difference between primary and secondary schools in China and Russia, and both present the characteristics of a combination of new and old methods. However, due to the large gap in class capacity in foreign language teaching between the two countries, even the same teaching method can have different effects when applied. Due to the large class capacity in primary and middle schools in China, it is difficult for teachers to interact with each student in every class, so the class often pays more attention to the explanation of grammar, words, and texts. Students rarely have opportunities to interact with teachers. This finally leads to weak oral ability. However, more and more teachers are making efforts to change this. Many teachers let students go to the podium to "speak" English by flipping the classroom, making presentations, text-based role play, etc., which can arouse students' enthusiasm to learn foreign languages. The extra preparation after class can improve students' ability to express themselves at least on one topic. Russia also has some experience that can be used as a reference for China. The small class setting of about 10 people makes the classroom more efficient and active [18].

6. Conclusion

In general, foreign language teaching in primary and secondary schools in China can refer to the experience of learning from Russia in many aspects. In terms of curriculum setting, the current situation of "English dominating the world" should be changed, more high-quality foreign language teachers should be cultivated and hired, and more choices of courses should be offered. The foreign language course provides students with practical experience in learning other foreign languages. In terms of textbook compilation and selection, Chinese schools can consider paying more attention to literary texts, allowing students to get in touch with original literary classics as soon as possible, and cultivate their literary literacy and foreign language thinking mode. In terms of teaching approaches, Chinese foreign language teachers can provide students with foreign language practice opportunities

as much as possible, and encourage students to listen to and discuss with each other in the classroom, transitioning from the "teacher show" class mode to "students show".

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