

Multilingualism in Education: The Case of Foreign Language Teaching in China

Jing Han¹ and Junkai Li^{2,3,*}

¹School of Foreign Languages, Tianjin University, Tianjin, China

²Tianjin University, China

³Laboratory UR3476 Crem, Université Lorraine, France

Email: hanjingtianjindaxue@gmail.com (J.H.); 216130@tju.edu.cn (J.K.L.)

*Corresponding author

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Abstract—The article presents a concise analysis of multilingualism in education with a particular emphasis on China. It explores the implications and advantages of multilingualism in educational contexts, along with effective strategies for its implementation. A brief examination of multilingualism practices reveals that countries such as Singapore, the USA and China are officially recognized as multilingual nations. Notably, Singapore has demonstrated notable success in promoting multilingualism through its educational practices. The advantages of incorporating multilingualism in education encompass fostering cultural awareness and appreciation, enhancing academic and educational value, stimulating creativity, facilitating social integration, and promoting the integration of critical languages in education.

Keywords—multilingualism, education, China, school teaching

I. INTRODUCTION

The benefits of multilingualism practices in education include the creation and appreciation of cultural awareness, adding academic and educational value, enhancing creativity, facilitating adjustment in society, and fostering an appreciation of foreign languages. Multilingualism can manifest on various levels, such as personal, social, and political. This paper analyzes it at the social level, which allows different members of a community to communicate in multiple languages [1].

The importance of multilingualism in education lies in promoting respect for and inclusion of linguistic and cultural diversity. Different languages are expressions of diverse cultures. Through multilingualism in education, students can better understand and respect people from different cultural backgrounds. This facilitates the development of individuals' self-awareness and proficiency in intercultural communication, equipping them to embody a global outlook and enhance their competitiveness on an international scale. [2]. Multilingualism in education emphasizes language diversity and multicultural understanding. Additionally, it promotes bilingual or multilingual education models to enable learners to master two or more languages. Finally, it emphasizes the cultivation of cultural awareness and intercultural communication skills to help students better adapt to and integrate into a global society.

II. MULTILINGUALISM AND EDUCATION

A. Language Teaching in Education System

Over the past few decades, there has been a clear

movement towards multilingual practices in the world, which is also evident in the title of UNESCO's 2003 education position paper, "Education in a Multilingual World [3]." This paper suggests conducting further research on comparative studies of multilingual education across multilingual nations worldwide at the social level. Before considering the case of China, we will have a brief review of the situation of multilingualism in the education system of Singapore and the USA. They illustrate the influences of globalization on language policies and practices of multilingualism in schools.

Singaporean multilingualism in education is world-renowned. One of Singapore's greatest strengths lies in its cultural diversity. Singapore's current multilingual education system is rooted in its cultural history, practical sensitivities, and recognition of the importance of maintaining a strong cultural identity in the future. The first step in creating an effective multilingual education system is to prioritize it. It is evident that having a multilingual society is crucial in Singapore, and they demonstrate this value by implementing actual policies that support it. The government, in a laudable effort to maintain this legacy, introduced a policy mandating bilingual education.

Passed in 1966, English was designated as one of the two languages to be taught, but not necessarily as the medium of instruction [4]. Due to a decline in enrollment numbers for non-English medium schools, English became the primary medium of instruction, while courses in Mandarin, Tamil, and Malay were offered to cater to students' cultural heritage.

The Ministry of Education Language Center (MOELC) was established in 1978 and is managed by the Ministry of Education of Singapore [5]. Students learn a third language at this central educational institution. Tuition fees are waived, but students are responsible for the cost of textbooks and other study materials.

In recent years, MOELC has launched new multilingual teaching courses, which allow students to better arrange their schedules through 8-week study throughout the school year. 8 languages are available under this plan including French, Japanese, and Arabic. The eight languages offered by MOELC are divided into three categories: foreign languages (French, German, Japanese, Spanish), Asian languages (Arabic, Indonesian), and special course languages (Malay, Mandarin) [6].

Singapore's approach to multilingualism in educational planning in the education context followed an instrumentalist theory—language is an instrument, and features can be objectively evaluated to determine the situations in which they would maximize potential. Singapore has been very

successful in implementing its policy of Multilingualism as the medium of teaching and learning at all levels of education.

B. Multilingualism and Critical Languages Education

De Swaan regards global languages as an integral part of the world system, proposes the concept of a global language system, and divides languages into super central language and hyper central language based on the value of different languages in communication [7]. The super central language is English. There are 12 super-center languages, namely Arabic, Chinese, English, French, German, Hindi, Japanese, Malay, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Swahili.

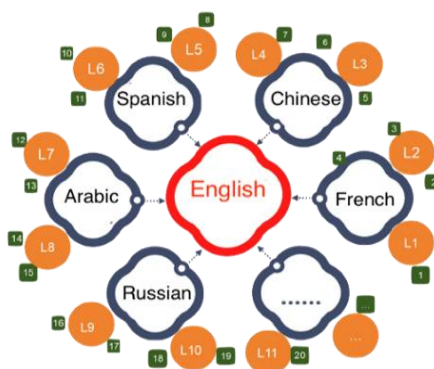


Fig. 1. Illustration of the global language system.

When the United States was founded, more than 20 languages were spoken, including Spanish, and French, as well as a variety of indigenous languages. The American government argues that multilingualism is a valuable resource for countering xenophobia, and calls attention to the potential power of well-designed educational policies to support heritage language maintenance, promote language rights, and respond to dangers posed by the disproportionate power accorded to English [8].

The U.S. government encourages the study of critical languages spoken in geographic areas of strategic importance to U.S. national security and the global economy through a variety of discretionary grants and scholarships. Beginning with the Bill Clinton administration, State of the Union addresses, and presidential speeches began to be translated into Spanish. The popularity of Spanish in schools and society has all made Spanish the most widely used second language in the United States.

The “9.11” terrorist attacks made the United States once again deeply feel the impact of terrorist attacks and clashes of civilizations on the future development of the United States. National security has become a major event that the United States must focus on in the new century. To eliminate the conflict of civilizations, ensure national security, and maintain its hegemonic status, the United States launched a safe language strategy, that is, a “key language” education strategy. The security function of language has been highlighted, language has been raised to the level of national strategy, and language has become an important tool in the United States’ global game [9].

In 2006, U.S. President Bush launched the U.S. National Security Language Initiative (NSLI), which lists 8 main key languages: Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Hindi, Japanese, Persian, and Turkish [10].

Table 1. Selected “Critical languages” programs in U.S. Elementary and secondary schools, 1987, 1997 and 2008.

	1987	1997		2008			
	Total	Public	Private	Total	Public	Private	Total
Chinese	12	1	—	0.3	2	4	3
Hebrew	6	—	4	2	—	2	1
Arabic		—	0.1	0.1	1	1	1
Japanese		2	6	3	1	2	1
Russian	2	1	—	1	—	0.4	0.2
Korean							0.2

Table 2. Total enrollment in selected “Critical Languages” in the USA, 1998–2009

	1998	2002	2006	2009
Japanese	33922	39475	50894	54797
Chinese	23692	27848	42909	51394
Arabic	4347	8725	19590	28848
Russian	21505	20978	22470	24192
Korean	3855	4156	5924	7433

As shown in Tables 1 and 2, “critical languages” are critical foreign languages in the United States, which are languages that are urgently needed by the United States and have an important impact on national security. “Critical languages” are directly related to the United States’s political stability, military strength, smooth diplomacy, information security, economic development, national unity, cultural exchanges, and educational cooperation.

III. MULTILINGUALISM IN CHINA’S LANGUAGE EDUCATION

Multilingualism in China’s formal education began in the Late period of Qing Dynasty. Foreign languages had been taught mainly by western missionaries, before they were included in schools or universities in modern terms.

A. History and Development of Multilingualism in China’s Education

The history of foreign language teaching in China began in the late Qing Dynasty. The origins of formal foreign language education in China can be traced back to the late 19th century, a period characterized by China’s encounters with Western powers. The early efforts in foreign language education were relatively modest, and the primary focus was on equipping diplomats and officials with the language skills necessary for engaging with the international community. Over the past six decades since the founding of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), the imperative of modernization as well as the maintenance of the legitimacy of China’s Communist Party (CCP) have shaped a new sociopolitical environment that has given rise to the expansion of the multilingualism in education [11].

Politicized Era (1949–1976)—Russian monopoly

A significant shift occurred in the mid-20th century when the Soviet Union emerged as a key ally of the People’s Republic of China. Seeing that the beginning of multilingualism in education in the PRC is closely related to Sino-Russian relations. This highly politicized period they were stemmed from the domestic political imperative to strengthen the regime of the communist government and its changing diplomatic relations with countries of different political orientations. The Chinese government decided to eliminate or reduce the teaching of other foreign languages, especially English, French, German, and Japanese because these languages were less useful or more hostile. Until 1956,

Russian was the only compulsory foreign language in secondary and higher education [12].

The Cultural Revolution (1966–1976): Disruption and Reprioritization

During the tumultuous years of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) she has had a profound impact on foreign language education in China. The socio-political upheaval led to a suspension of formal education, including foreign language programs, as educational institutions were disrupted, and traditional curricula were dismantled [13]. Intellectual pursuits, including language studies, were suppressed, and foreign languages were often stigmatized as symbols of bourgeois influence. This period of upheaval significantly disrupted the continuity of foreign language education, and many language professionals were subjected to persecution. The interruption caused by the Cultural Revolution left a void in linguistic continuity, with subsequent generations facing challenges in foreign language proficiency due to the disruption of educational systems.

Reform and Opening Up Policy (1978–1990)

The Reform and Opening-Up Era The new government led by Deng Xiaoping had learned a lesson from the Politicized Period and shifted its focus to economic development with the Opening-Up and Reform Policy that gradually geared China towards a market economy. The accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001 further confirmed the trend of opening and marketization, making China an important link in the global economy [14].

The evolution of foreign language education in China has been a complex and multifaceted process, characterized by a series of geopolitical alignments, ideological transformations, socio-political disruptions, and practical adaptations to international developments.

B. Multilingualism in Chinese Schools

After the beginning of educational reform in 1977, the expansion of higher education in the People’s Republic of China was rapid. English is a compulsory course starting from the third grade of primary school. English is a compulsory subject in all secondary schools, high schools, and universities.

In China, multilingual education institutions mainly include primary schools, secondary schools and universities. According to the 2022 National Survey Report on the Construction and Development of Multilingual Disciplines in multilingual education at the econdary school level, the types of school courses offering languages other than English are divided into optional courses, first foreign languages, and second foreign languages [15].

In 2017, the Ministry of Education of China promulgated the “General High School Curriculum Plan” and the “General High School Curriculum Standards” for 6 foreign languages [16]. This is a landmark event for the policy implementation of foreign language planning for fundamental education in China’s new era. There are the following four changes in foreign language planning compared with the past.

The number of foreign languages is on the rise, with German, French, and Spanish being added to the list alongside established languages like English, Japanese, and Russian, in efforts to maintain linguistic diversity.

The selection of first and second foreign languages is

extensive. Secondary education in China has the autonomy to select the first foreign language from the six options mentioned above and is advised to facilitate the provision of opportunities for offering second foreign languages.

There is a growing trend towards the formalization and standardization of multilingual curricula. Significant advancements have been made in the development of curriculum standards for German, French, and Spanish languages. This marks the first instance where national curriculum standards for each language have been concurrently drafted or revised, with a focus on defining “subject core competencies” based on shared principles within the field of foreign language studies.

According to the 2022 *National Survey Report on the Construction and Development of Multilingualism in Primary and Secondary Schools*, the number of students studying languages other than English in 2019 and 2020 in 2022 is shown in the Table 3. Overall, the number of primary school students learning a language other than English is relatively low nationwide. For example: In 2019, only 13,294 primary school students in China chose German, the most popular language [17].

Table 3. Number of students studying languages other than English

	Japanese	Russian	German	French	Spanish
2022	47487	26401	17556	17420	13856
2020	17682	30328	7992	4470	4035
2019	13473	5289	13294	3479	3761

China’s college entrance examinations have evolved to include a more diverse and rigorous approach to foreign language testing. Chinese high school senior students now have the option to choose from a variety of languages including English, Japanese, Russian, German, French, and Spanish, with two opportunities to take the test.

For example, the characteristics of Japanese college entrance examination questions include simplicity, similarities with Chinese, and a growing interest in Japanese culture among the younger generation in China. Conversely, Russian language questions in college entrance exams are relatively straightforward, but the complexity arises from the Russian alphabet, pronunciation, and grammar, despite the close relationship between China and Russia [18]. In contrast, college entrance exam questions in French, German, and Spanish differ in difficulty from those in English, with these three languages not necessarily being easier. However, the advantage lies in the lower cost of studying abroad in European countries such as France, Germany, and Spain, compared to the United States and England. Therefore, Chinese high school students with limited English proficiency may improve their performance in college entrance exams by choosing to study Japanese or Russian.

C. Multilingualism in Chinese Universities

The variety of multilingualism in education of China is primarily evident in the foreign language universities situated across different cities in the country. The subsequent statistical data presents the count of individuals proficient in multiple foreign languages within the prominent Universities of Foreign Studies in various Chinese cities [19].

Table 4. Numbers of foreign language departments in Chinese universities

English	Japanese	Russian	French	German	Spanish
928	450	157	137	110	96
Korean	Thai	Arabic	Portuguese	Italian	Vietnamese
93	44	39	33	22	21

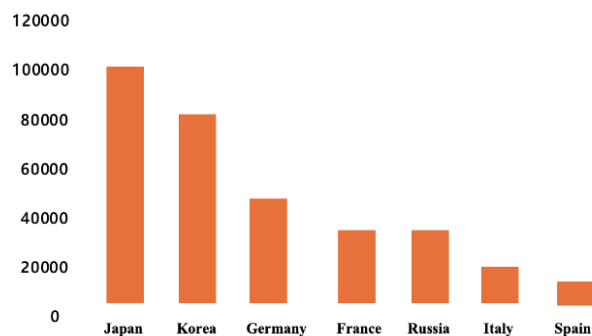
Presently, a significant portion of multilingual language instruction in China is centralized within foreign language universities located in diverse urban centers. The diversity of languages present in Chinese universities is evident through the availability of various language majors at foreign language institutions located in different urban centers. The emphasis on multilingualism within university settings often revolves around the pursuit of international study opportunities and strategic career planning.

Table 5. Major universities offering multiple languages courses in China

City	University	Number of foreign languages
Beijing	Beijing Foreign Studies University	101
Shanghai	Shanghai International Studies University	54
Guangzhou	Guangdong University of Foreign Studies	31
Beijing	Beijing International Studies University	31
Tianjin	Tianjin Foreign Studies University	31
Beijing	Communication University of China	24
Xi'An	Xi'An International Studies University	22
Chongqing	Sichuan International Studies University	22
Changchun	Jilin University of Foreign Languages	21
Dalian	Dalian University of Foreign Languages	16
Kunming	Yunnan Minzu University	15

As China's involvement and significance in the process of internationalization and globalization increases, a growing number of Chinese students are pursuing further studies abroad. By the end of the last decade the number of Chinese students abroad made up the largest group of international students in the world and during the next decade this group will become the world's largest foreign student population.

Table 6. Numbers of Chinese students studying abroad



Sino-foreign Cooperative Education Institutions (SCEIs) has become the integral component of the multilingualism in Chinese higher education. It is jointly established by foreign higher education institutions or university consortiums and Chinese universities. It is located within the Chinese university and recruits students jointly. They are an important platform for the international co-development of higher education that has a remarkable impact on globalization. Political, economic, and social forces of globalization have thrust SCEIs into a more competitive global knowledge economy as a valuable industry in higher education [20].

Sino-foreign joint institutes are mainly established by foreign higher education institutions or university consortiums in cooperation with Chinese universities. They are located within Chinese universities and both parties jointly recruit students. The main advantages of Sino-foreign joint education are summarized as follows: Sino-foreign Cooperative Education Institutions (SCEIs) are always have a Chinese university campus [21]. These students who participate in the SCEIs are simultaneously registered in a foreign university. These SCEI's students are eligible for double or triple degrees, including undergraduate, master and doctoral levels. Graduates of Sino-Foreign Joint University typically possess remarkable bilingual and multilingual skills (in Chinese, English, and a third language). Graduates have a high degree of international mobility in their career development after graduation, providing a broader international platform for personal career development.

One of the prominent challenges in the implementation of multilingualism is the uneven allocation of resources and disparities in the quality of language education. While major urban centers may have access to well-equipped language programs and proficient educators, rural areas often face resource constraints. This creates a disparity in the quality of language education, limiting opportunities for students in less privileged regions to access critical languages [22].

Despite efforts to diversify language education, there remains a pervasive overemphasis on English. The dominance of English as the primary foreign language has led to an imbalance in language proficiency, with other critical languages receiving comparatively less attention. This overreliance on English may limit China's linguistic diversity and its ability to engage meaningfully with regions where English is not the predominant language. In summary, the multilingualism in China's education can be divided into six groups according to their cultural, economic, social, regional, and other influences.

- Group 1: English and Russian (compulsory education)
- Group 2: Japanese (teenager preference)
- Group 3: French, German (in good standing)
- Group 4: Spanish, Korean, Arabic (Emerging Markets)
- Group 5: Thai, Portuguese, Italian, Vietnamese, Malay, etc. (geography and culture)
- Group 6: Minor languages taught only in certain universities specializing in foreign languages

China, with its rich linguistic tapestry and a rapidly evolving global role, has embraced the concept of multilingualism in foreign language education [23]. However, this ambitious endeavor is not without its challenges and insufficiencies, particularly as the nation navigates the implementation of a critical languages strategy. Examining the multifaceted aspects of multilingualism in China sheds light on the complexities inherent in language education policies, offering perspectives on how to address existing challenges and envision a more robust future.

IV. ENHANCING MULTILINGUALISM IN EDUCATION OF CHINA

With policy support, multilingual education is entering its best era. Nowadays, the global landscape is undergoing profound changes. The trend of world multipolarity and economic globalization is unstoppable. As China plays an increasingly important role on the world stage, it is exploring the path of peaceful development and win-win cooperation with other countries in the world, promoting common human values, and building a community with a shared future for mankind. In many countries, speaking multiple languages is a very common phenomenon [24]. Ethnic, linguistic and cultural diversity are distinctive features of multilingualism as a country with prominence. The government of the People's Republic of China attaches great importance to higher education in China. The content of this chapter is to summarize the advantages and disadvantages of multilingual education in China through the following cases.

A. Case of French and Japanese: Popular Languages

French enjoys a highly favorable reputation globally, which can be attributed in part to the continuous efforts and promotional activities of the French government. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, China and France have maintained continuous friendly diplomatic relations. French higher education and research have attracted many high-end Chinese talents to study in France. Due to historical reasons, French is the official language and spoken language in very 20 countries. The French-speaking Africa represents large and wide potential market for China [25]. In China, French has consistently been a popular language with abundant educational resources available. It serves as a key language in promoting multilingualism within the Chinese educational system [26].

On the other hand, there is a significant abundance of opportunities for Japanese language acquisition and cultural engagement. Owing to geographical proximity, there is a frequent exchange of visits between Chinese and Japanese primary, middle, and high school students, as well as college students. This active interaction between the two countries is further bolstered by substantial support from private

foundations in both China and Japan, aimed at fostering cultural and educational initiatives. Graduates with a specialization in Japanese studies from Chinese universities enjoy favorable prospects in the job market. These factors collectively contribute to the advancement and enhancement of research on Japan and the Japanese language by Chinese educators and scholars. Paying attention to the importance of Japanese language development can better provide important development support for the sustainable development of China and the multilingualism in education.

B. Case of Malay and Swahili: Less Taught Languages

China and ASEAN countries are geographically close and culturally connected. As a member of ASEAN, Malaysia has close ties with China and is an important node country in the "Maritime Silk Road" of the 21st century. Malaysia represents an important partner for China. Up to 2024, only 7 universities in China offer a course to the Malay language. The key of Malay to China lies at the intersection of cultural exchange, economic ties, and linguistic diversity.

Meanwhile, China has established strong political and economic partnerships with numerous African nations. Compared with other East African countries, Swahili is spoken by a population exceeding 100 million individuals and is a prevalent language in countries such as Tanzania, Uganda, and Kenya.

However, Swahili is only taught in 5 universities in China. Africa represents a rapidly growing market with significant economic potential, and learning Swahili equips Chinese students with language skills for business, investment, and collaboration across the continent. Promoting Swahili in China's education can enrich students' understanding of different cultures and foster a more inclusive global vision.

V. CONCLUSION

Multilingualism in education in China has undergone a profound and multifaceted evolution, reflecting the nation's dynamic socio-political landscape and its interactions with the global community. The historical trajectory of foreign language education in China can be traced through pivotal periods, each marked by distinctive linguistic priorities and geopolitical influences.

The exploration of multilingualism in foreign language education in China represents not only a response to global imperatives but a strategic move towards preparing the nation for active participation in an internationalized world. The historical roots, the current state, and the challenges and perspectives associated with the multiplication of foreign languages in education collectively narrate a story of adaptation, enrichment, and a commitment to fostering global linguistic competence.

As China adopts forward-looking perspectives, embraces international collaboration, and cultivates a lifelong learning culture, it positions itself to not only navigate the complexities of global interactions but also contribute significantly to the global discourse on multilingualism, cultural understanding, and international cooperation. The tapestry of languages woven into China's educational fabric is emblematic of a nation poised to play a pivotal role in fostering linguistic diversity and cultural exchange in our interconnected world.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Li conducted the research; Han analyzed the data; both authors wrote the paper; both authors had approved the final version.

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