

A Study on the Selection and Development of English Education

– A Case Study of China and Belgium

Dingning Yao^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Environment, Education and Development, The University of Manchester, Manchester, UK*

a. dingning.yao@student.manchester.ac.uk

**corresponding author*

Abstract: The importance of foreign language education has been highlighted in the globalized state nowadays. Foreign language teaching is gradually entering the education curriculums of various countries. The current global trend can be analyzed by finding the similarities of foreign language teaching in different countries. This article chooses China in Asia and Belgium in Europe for comparison. This article focuses on the reasons for choosing to learn a foreign language in two countries and when education begins. Through analysis, this paper argues that the choice of language education should take into account the needs of social development and national development. As the world's common language, English plays an important role in realizing nationalization and promoting talent development, so foreign languages have become the first choice for second language education and learning in many countries. In addition, this paper argues that based on children's education and growth characteristics, starting to learn a foreign language as early as possible can effectively attract and master it. This paper suggests that people should fully understand the importance of English education, fully grasp the characteristics of students' age and stage, and improve the talent training plan.

Keywords: English education, China and Belgium, beginning time of learning

1. Introduction

In the past few decades, countries all over the world have become more interdependent. The sharing of new technologies and resources has brought people around the world into close contact and enabled countries to develop at a high rate [1]. With the close relationship between countries, foreign language education has become increasingly essential. Different countries have their arrangements in the education system according to their educational background and targets. Finding the similarities in education in different countries is helpful for students in their language learning by providing a clear understanding of the trends and ways of foreign language education in the world.

In this essay, China and Belgium are chosen to be looked at in their foreign language education. China is located in eastern Asia. In the past, the education system in China was noted for its emphasis on test preparation and rote memorization. Many educational policies in China, such as the 'Nine-

year Compulsory education' and the double reduction policy, are being widely discussed today. Belgium is a country in Northwestern Europe. It is squeezed between European giants: France to the southwest, Germany to the east, and the Netherlands to the north. It is famous for championing translating compromises into institutional complexity [2]. The complicated system also affects education in Belgium, especially in the decision of foreign language education. Both countries are famous for their education systems, so it is worth discussing foreign language education.

This essay will mainly discuss detailed information about foreign language education in China and Belgium, followed by analyzing the choice and the beginning time of foreign language education. Some suggestions for the trends will be drawn at the end.

2. Foreign Language Education in China

2.1. The Trajectory of Choosing Foreign Language Education

The historical level will be shown in this part to have some clear information on foreign language education in China. The People's Republic of China was founded in 1949. Russian was China's first choice for foreign language education in the 1950s. The education system at that time was set up, which followed the Soviet model after the founding of the People's Republic of China [3]. China chose this education system because the Soviet Union was also a socialist country at the time. Using scientifically designed and hierarchically executed plans, this model could effectively achieve the goals of the time: rapid industrialization and capital accumulation [4]. However, the power of English has been shown in many aspects from that time. English has been highly valued in political, military and economic aspects of nation-building at different times [5]. China is a complex linguistic society, but policymakers see English as the key to modernization [6]. After the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1979, China and the United States established solid diplomatic relations, and China has since put a premium on English language education. Also, English has become the main tool for communicating with other countries and making progress in modern science and technology from then on. Nowadays, English is still the primary choice for foreign language education in China.

2.2. Current Situation of Foreign Language Education in China

In this part, the details of the current situation will be described to understand the curriculum and targets that China built. The state-run public education system mainly administers education in China under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Education. The government funded the 'Nine-year Compulsory education' that all the residents can get and need to have nine years of education with no fee. Nowadays, English has been chosen as the first foreign language to teach at almost all the schools in China.

The Ministry of Education published the document of English Curriculum Standards in 2001 [7]. English has since been established as a formal subject in the primary school curriculum. Primary schools have the right to set up English courses from the first grade, depending on the schools themselves. Still, the government makes English compulsory from the third grade until the end of the 'Nine-year Compulsory Education'. According to English Curriculum Standards, Chinese students have 2-4 lessons per week as the English foreign language teaching in primary schools and 4-7 English lessons per week in secondary schools. The belief of it is 'All for Student Development'. The target of English foreign language teaching is from five aspects: knowledge, effects, skills, cultural awareness and learning strategies instead of putting knowledge and skills at the most important places in the past before the reform of foreign language education [7]. Foreign language education in primary schools mainly focuses on students' enthusiasm, interest and confidence in English learning. It creates an excellent foreign language learning atmosphere for students to have a good sense of language, pronunciation and intonation. In addition, let them have basic communication skills to build a solid

foundation for effective and stable improvement of foreign language learning in the future. In secondary school, this stage focuses on developing students' learning strategies and language skills and encourages students to participate in and actively discuss familiar and knowledgeable topics.

3. Foreign Language Education in Belgium

3.1. Education System in Belgium

Belgium has a complicated education system, which the government does not control. Belgium segregated political power into three levels, creating a unique form of a federal state. They are the federal government, the three regions and the three language communities. Three communities are the French Community (French-speaking), the Flemish Community (Dutch-speaking) and the German-speaking Community. Brussels is except from these three communities, which is the only bilingual language area that speaks Dutch and French. Since the 1980s, the three communities have controlled the education system in Belgium independently [2]. A policy on language education was established in the national law in 1963, stating that only the region's language can be used as the teaching language in schools [8]. For Brussels, the schools teach either French or Dutch. Although it is hard for three communities to plan and promote foreign language education in that situation, they still take action to move forward with the reform of language education under the policies. French has been chosen as the first foreign language taught in schools in the German-speaking and Dutch communities. In the French-speaking community, Dutch is the compulsory course as the first foreign language. In recent years, all three communities have shown a gradual shift in focus from the original choice of foreign language teaching to English language teaching under the complaints and voices of parents and students.

3.2. The Reasons and Considerations for the Insistence and Shift

3.2.1. Considerations for the Insistence

Even though the will of the people is essential, German-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities have their persistent in choosing foreign language teaching because of some considerations. First, location is one of the essential factors when deciding. The main teaching language for the area around the German-speaking community is French. In order to let students gain professional and social success, French has been chosen as the first foreign language to be taught in schools with the aim that students can get a place in higher education and integrate into the Walloon region. The second factor is the use of French in Belgium. French has a significant influence on employment, education, economic and symbolic aspects that it is the first choice while working and communicating. Boemer and Darqueennes claimed that the community was acutely aware of the precarious state of German use in Belgium [9]. Therefore, learning French as a foreign language is important for students in German-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities. For this reason, the French-speaking community is more liberal in its choice of foreign language teaching instead of insisting on the original choice. Students can choose their first foreign language from the courses schools provide.

3.2.2. The Reasons for the Shift

While the communities have their concerns, they also recognize the need to shift to English language education. First, English has a dominant position and power worldwide. Learning English can benefit students greatly, including gaining good employment opportunities, having better higher education, studying abroad, traveling abroad and building relationships worldwide [10]. Second, English has a high exponential presence in youth culture. Students have a great interest in and a positive attitude

toward learning English to understand and know more about pop culture. The motivation can be effective in foreign language education. Therefore, all three communities are trying to shift and balance simultaneously to improve the foreign language education curriculum in Belgium.

3.3. The Beginning Time of Learning the Foreign Language in Belgium

All three communities in Belgium set an early beginning time for learning the first foreign language. All three communities require students to take the foreign language course in elementary schools, with two hours of teaching a week from Year 5 [11]. However, most schools begin their courses for students at 10. Even in the German-speaking community, students learn French as their first foreign language at the beginning of primary school to reach the aim of multilingualism [12].

4. Discussion

4.1. Similarities Analysis

From the clear information on foreign language education in China and Belgium, the two similarities can be found: the choice and the beginning time of learning a foreign language.

Both countries preferred English as the first choice of their foreign language education. For China, the primary choice of foreign language teaching in the education system is always English due to the abovementioned factors: modernization, diplomatic relations, and political and economic aspects. For Belgium, although the ministries of education have several considerations, the high reputation, international level, and exponential presence in the youth culture of English create a trend that schools gradually adjust the learning proportion and the order of English from the second foreign language to the first one.

Besides, both countries begin foreign language courses early. In China, English is the compulsory course for foreign language teaching from the third grade mentioned above. Schools also have the right to set up the course early, from the first grade, in order to provide students with foreign language education from a young age and lay a solid foundation. In Belgium, students are asked to start learning a second language at Year 5 and the beginning of secondary school in French-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities. In the German-speaking community, students are asked to learn French as their first foreign language at the beginning of primary school [12]. In Brussels, students also learn their second language, French or Dutch, at primary school. Although these are the compulsory beginning times, most schools in Belgium, especially in French-speaking and Dutch-speaking communities, adjust the time and begin the course early from grade 1 or around 10.

4.2. Reasons Analysis

4.2.1. The Reasons for the Choice

The main reason is the power and the dominant status of English worldwide. From the choice of foreign language in both countries and the shifting trend, the power and importance of English all over the world can be shown. Although there are only around 400 million native speakers of English, more than 1.5 billion people can speak English. Almost 60% of information on the Internet worldwide is used in English, which is the common language of the global economy and popular culture [13]. In education, PISA is a tool to measure educational systems by testing students from three aspects: reading, science, and mathematics. The OECD supports it. Andrews and other researchers claimed that global testing creates competition [14]. Countries want to do well on this test to prove their powerful and perfect education system, so they often adapt the learning content to the scope of the PISA. It is a test worldwide every three years, dramatically influencing every country. However, Asil

and Brown pointed out that there is a problem of linguistic bias potentially underlying the design of the reading test [15]. English thinking interferes with the design. It is a severe problem that needs to be solved, but this also shows the fact that English is extremely powerful in affecting education.

Because of the dominant status of English, learning English can benefit students a lot, including gaining good employment opportunities, having better higher education, studying abroad, traveling abroad and also building relationships with people all over the world [10]. Therefore, the long-term global leadership of English has made students in both countries attach great importance to English as a foreign language learning, which has even influenced the three communities in Belgium to re-plan English as a foreign language learning and balance their first choice of foreign language teaching with the considerations within the states.

4.2.2. The Reasons for Learning at An Early Beginning Time

An early beginning time of learning a foreign language is effective for students to master and benefit in future study. The European Commission claimed that children could have a good beginning in gaining social, cognitive and emotional development from language exposure at an early age [16]. One reason is that younger students' learning style differs from older ones. More youthful students often prefer a recessive learning style, requiring teachers to shape an immersive environment that focuses on sensory stimulation. Songs and games are good choices. In China, the Ministry of Education proposed clear requirements for teaching content. Teachers are asked to teach with the support of visual aids, pictures, videos, and also the teacher's actions to help students memorize [17]. Young children have certain age-related cognitive advantages, such as higher brain plasticity and a desire for communication and interaction [18]. The interplay between recessive learning styles and higher brain plasticity can lay a solid foundation for students at an early age.

In addition, researchers found that 6 – 7-year-old children have more positive attitudes towards their foreign language learning experiences than children aged 10-11 [19]. Older students often lose a positive attitude and motivation to study because of worries and distractions from homework, grades, and entering a higher school. Young children have fewer worries and more curiosity towards learning. A positive attitude towards learning at an early age cultivates students' long-lost interest in learning foreign languages and the motivation of continuous learning and leads to efficient knowledge acquisition.

5. Further Suggestions

The choice and the beginning time of foreign language education can lead to two trends in China and Belgium. To improve and develop foreign language education in the future, there are some suggestions that may help. For English learning, reform of teaching contents and targets is essential. Because of the long-term leadership of English, there are plenty of benefits in several aspects, including employment, education and the economy. Students should not only learn English but also be able to use English flexibly in their daily lives and understand the culture behind the language. Instead of boring grammar and word learning, providing students with more English-related activities, especially those related to oral English, can better enable students to master a language. The ministries of education should continuously reform and optimize the foreign language education curriculum towards this goal.

For the early beginning time of learning, teacher training is indispensable. Sewell claimed that it is important for teachers to understand students' ages, developmental levels, attitudes, motivations and learning strategies while teaching [20]. The different learning style of young children is mentioned above. Teachers need to provide appropriate teaching methods to an age group that they have never taught before which is a big challenge. Therefore, training is necessary for teachers to

make sure they know the adequate teaching methods while schools move the beginning time of learning a foreign language forward.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay mainly focused on foreign language education in China and Belgium with two similarities: the choice of a foreign language and the beginning time of learning a foreign language. The backgrounds of foreign language education in China and Belgium are discussed separately before comparing and analyzing the two results. One is that English is an essential and powerful foreign language that should be learned due to its dominant status and useful help in future studies and work. The other one is that the early beginning time of learning a foreign language is effective for students to master because of their certain age-related cognitive advantages and positive attitude towards learning. This essay provides clear information and similarities of foreign language education in the two countries, which helps to fulfill the foreign language aspect of the comparison in education. There are still several differences and similarities by comparison, so continuing to find more comparative points and trends worldwide is necessary and meaningful. In further studies, other countries are also worth discussing and concluding the trends in foreign language education.

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