

# *A Review on Foreign Language Education Policies in China from 1949 to 2023*

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**Abstract:** This paper reviews on the topic of foreign language education policies in China from 1949 to 2023. It mainly focuses on English and Russian. In this paper, the timeline is separated by three important timepoint. The first important section is in 1949. As the People's Republic of China came into being, complicated and convoluted foreign language education policies in China started to emerge. The second important section is in 1978. In this year, Chinese government launched the famous national strategy of reform and opening up, and thus many changes in Chinese foreign language education policy happened. The third important section is in 2021, and in this year, Chinese government launched the Double Reduction Policy. This is a policy aiming to alleviate students' homework burden and off campus training burden in the compulsory educational stage. This policy uses various kinds of measures to reduce students' burden in academic learning, help families who cannot afford luxurious after-class tutoring fee, and enable children to have more time and space needed for all round development. In general, this paper concludes the development of foreign language education policies in China from 1949 to 2023 and gives some points in economic and historical effects to English and Russian learning during this historical process.

**Keywords:** Foreign language, English, Russian, Education policy, Double Reduction Policy

## **1. Introduction**

There are many papers and books that study foreign language development in China, including English, Russian and other minor languages which spread less popularly than these two languages. Chen believes that China's societal setting at the time had a significant impact on English instruction there [1]. This paper concludes three processes of foreign language education policy. The transformation process of English education in China has gone through the ups and downs of English education during the socialist period of New China, and then even was interrupted due to the influence of social ideology. It has recovered to receiving widespread support and attention from the country and society after the reform and opening up, and ultimately Chinese people pay much more attention in learning English now.

## **2. Foreign Language Education Policies in China**

### **2.1. From 1949 to 1978: From Russian to English**

First, the past policy on foreign language education in China can be reviewed from 1949 to 1978. After the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949, it is possible to select an important point in 1978. In this year, the Chinese government launched a strategy of reform and opening up, which also made many changes in Chinese foreign language education policy. The educational system in China continued to follow the same format from before the establishment of the People's Republic of China from 1949 to 1952. Since the 1953 publication of the first five-year plan, things have changed, and learning Russian has grown popular. Russian had increasingly taken the place of English [1]. This is a progress of Russian language learning. From 1953 to 1966, due to the economic and political situation at that time, the Chinese government advocated for people to learn Russian as a foreign language and arranged it as a mandatory lesson in elementary, middle, and high school. In 1951, there are 36 universities having Department of Russian and 7 academies of Russian [2]. Until 1953, China built 6 academies for students to be specialized in Russian, and compared within 1949; there is only one college built for learning Russian [3]. This trend makes Russian nearly the only foreign language at that time in China. In 1950, The Ministry of Education has issued a draft provisional teaching plan for middle schools, which stipulates that if there are sufficient teaching materials for teachers, Russian should be set up as a second foreign language in junior and high schools. From this plan, it can be found that China supported junior and high schools to teach Russian, whereas English can only be a second choice at that time. Thus, the Russian language learning can be found all over China, which also made more and more people learn Russian. Part of the reason is that most students refused to attend English classes in order to expressing their dissatisfaction according to China-US relation at that time. This trend influenced the number of teachers who taught English during that period, including both foreign teachers and Chinese teachers. After 1954, English education declined to the point where English teachers have to switch careers and teach Russian [1]. In the mid-fifties, as the relationship between China and Russia became worse, and the relationship between China and the USA broke the ice, English had become major foreign language in China gradually. There is also another major factor that Zhou Enlai, secretary of the Communist Party of China Central Committee, proposing that China should expand foreign education and then demand all educational sections to spread English education. This is an important decision for China to develop Chinese foreign education. It indicates Chinese people to pay attention to learning English, which is more universal during that time, is more vital compared with Russian. Meanwhile, English departments were resumed in some comprehensive universities and other educational institutions. From 1966 to 1976, due to the impact of the Great Cultural Revolution, the foreign language teaching is basically interrupted [2]. Although at the end of the 10 years, Chinese universities began to recruit students again, the government still paid more attention to English rather than Russian. It can be found that Russia had a major status in China from 1949 to 1966. During this period, China formed an alliance with Russia and also received economic and technological assistance from Russia, so it makes sense for Russia to have that important situation. There is another reason that there are many Soviet experts hired by the Chinese government, which means China had a desperate need for people specializing in Russian at that time. The macro guidance in China helps improve the quality and spreading of Russian, and The First Russian Teaching Syllabus for Higher Education Institutions was released in 1956. In 1958, a Russian language teaching system in higher education institutions has been formed, radiating across the country and centered around three schools, which are Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, and Russian Department of Heilongjiang University [4]. In the aspect of policy, the first five-year plan and the second five-year plan both played important roles in nurturing Russian language users, but after the 10-years cultural

revolution, China faced an urgent shortage in both Russian and English language users. For a country, it is not rational to only nurture one specific second language instead of teaching various kinds of foreign languages. Because the relations between countries change frequently, it is easy to foresee that one day, people will find that they lack users having specific foreign languages.

## **2.2. From 1978 to 2021: Inconsistent Development from the Reform and the Opening up**

After 1978, foreign language education in China developed rapidly, especially in the field of English education. In the middle and late 1980s, with the normalization of Sino-Soviet relations, Russian teaching also developed to a certain extent. In the 1990s, despite the adverse impact of the disintegration of the former Soviet Union, with the further expansion of China's opening up and the continuous recovery of Economy of Russia's economy, China and Russia have increasingly increased cooperation in economic and other fields. But in general, China has paid more attention to English than to Russian from 1978 to 2021. In 1978, Deng Xiaoping proposed the policy of opening up to the outside world, with the aim of introducing foreign funds, technology, and experience. After the reform and opening up, Chinese people suddenly changed their attitude towards the West, and a trend of advocating for foreign culture emerged in society. Young people intentionally or unintentionally imitate the West [5]. At this time, English, as a symbol language of the West, its status also rapidly improved. This means that previously hostile language has also become a useful communication tool. At the same time, the Chinese government has designated English courses as the main curriculum for middle school students and expanded the enrolment of English majors. Amateur English training classes in society are also very popular. In the 1980s, the English craze became a social trend [1].

In 1976, the decade-long Cultural Revolution ended. In 1972, China-US diplomatic relations began to normalize. Especially since the 1980s, different forms of international exchange and cooperation have become increasingly frequent. The result has promoted the growth of China's national economy. Not only the total national income, but also import and export trade volume have grown rapidly. These changes have brought about new economic policies such as opening ports, and the Chinese government has also changed its view on Western countries such as the United States, which emphasizes the common interests of both sides rather than ideological differences in Sino Western exchanges. At this time, Deng Xiaoping also underlined frequently that science and technology are essential to modernization and that education is essential to the advancement of science and technology. Following approval of two Ministry of Education documents—*Opinions on the Enrolment of Higher Education Institutions in 1977* and *Opinions on the Enrolment of Graduate Students in Higher Education Institutions—by the State Council in 1977*, the college entrance exam was once again administered. Since 1978, foreign languages have been one of the compulsory subjects in the Chinese college entrance examination. Considering that the teaching of English as a second language was largely abandoned during the Cultural Revolution, the percentage increase in foreign language exam scores was adopted year by year to be included in the total score. The school's decision to prioritize English education has benefited from this action in 1978. Another key point in China's history is the revival of the college admission exam, which allowed it to develop into a popular social practice. Around 1979, approximately 2000 people were sent to English speaking countries for further education each year, and this number also increased year by year. By 1987, the number of people studying abroad had reached over 5000 [6]. Similarly, foreign experts and teachers were invited to teach and guide in China. Therefore, English is often associated with going abroad and high income. This is also related to the gap in foreign language talents caused by the Cultural Revolution. This upsurge of learning English has correspondingly occupied the living space of Russian education. Until the late 1980s, the border trade with Russia, mainly in Heilongjiang and radiating to many provinces, drove the demand and cultivation of the talent market. The number of

tourists and translators learning Russian has gradually increased. In the late 1990s, with the expansion of enrolment in universities, the scale of Russian education also saw significant development.

In the year of 1982 and 1986, the education department proposed *the Opinions on Strengthening Foreign Language Education in Middle Schools and the Full time English Teaching Syllabus separately*. Both documents show that the Chinese government has begun to realize the importance of English as an international language. The latter also provides a detailed explanation of the requirements and objectives of English teaching in secondary schools. In July 1988, the People's Education Press decided to collaborate with Longman Publishing Group Co., Ltd. in the UK to compile a nine-year compulsory education junior high school English textbook, which was a breakthrough in the history of Chinese secondary school English textbook writing. The 1988 Junior High School Syllabus also encouraged nationwide innovation in English textbooks, so Shanghai, Guangdong, Sichuan, Jiangsu, and Beijing have all developed English textbooks with vastly different styles. Among them, Xuejun Middle School in Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province once used the textbook Look, Listen, and Learn compiled by renowned British educator Alexander. Although the results of the reform were not very successful, the experience is worth learning from [1]. In the development process of foreign language education in New China, 2007, there have also been reforms in the professional direction in universities. In 1983, Shanghai Foreign Studies University added six new majors to its traditional language program, including International Journalism and Foreign Economic and Trade. After 1990, there were also exams such as Test for English Majors Band 4 and Band 8 (TEM-4 and TEM-8) that were used to evaluate the English quality of English major students.

In 2001, the Chinese Ministry of Education issued *the National English Teaching Guidelines* to guide English teaching in schools. Actually, this is the revised version of the previous teaching syllabus. Under the government's plan, millions of K-12 English teachers nationwide participated in teacher training programs from 2001 to 2008, but the training results were not satisfactory. Although thousands of teachers in Yunnan Province have received training, 80% of them do not have the qualifications to teach English [7]. In 2013, with the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative, China's demand for minor language talents is more urgent, but the current development of small language education in Chinese universities does not fully meet social needs. Most students majoring in small languages in China do not have ideal practical training opportunities and platforms. Even if there are opportunities, most of them are mere assessment mechanisms [8]. Currently, there are only a few well-known foreign language schools in China that specialized in teaching small languages.

### 2.3. From 2021 to 2023: Appearance of the Double Reduction Policy

The Double Reduction Policy in China's education system aims to significantly lessen the amount of homework and off-campus training that students must complete during their obligatory education. On July 24, 2021, the General Office of the Chinese Communist Party and the General Office of the State Council issued *the Opinions on Further Alleviating Students' Homework Burden and Off Campus Training Burden in the Compulsory Educational Stage*. This is the Double Reduction Policy's official name. The goal of this program is to lessen the academic strain on pupils, assist families who cannot afford the high cost of extracurricular tutoring, and provide kids the time and space they require for healthy growth [9]. This is also a sound national policy to stop capital from encroaching on China's educational system, monopolizing its educational resources, and ultimately undermining China's educational system. China has therefore executed the Double Reduction Policy, eliminated capitalization from the current educational system, ensured equity in education, and reestablished public awareness of public education [10]. Although this policy has caused many tutoring teachers to lose their jobs in the short term, students who come to China for a long time will benefit greatly. On the one hand, Chinese students can get rid of endless homework and have the opportunity to achieve real all-round development. On the other hand, teachers can also reduce part

of their workload and have time to think about how to guide students instead of just cramming education.

The Double Reduction Policy has damaged the teaching and training industry, especially the English teaching and training industry. The advantage of this policy is to prevent capital from monopolizing the education market, but it has also led to many teachers in the industry losing their jobs. In China, education companies led by New Oriental have to consider re selecting the target audience. In 2021, three months after the introduction of the Double Reduction Policy, New Oriental announced that it would no longer open K-9 discipline counselling business. In the future, its focus will be on adult language courses and other exam preparation courses. In terms of employment, many employees in the education and training industry have also entered industries such as study abroad consulting or completely seeking alternative employment opportunities.

In general, China has issued many measures to reduce the burden on primary and secondary school students in the past. For example, after 2000, the Ministry of Education issued *Multiple Documents Including the Measures for Reducing the Burden on Primary and Secondary School Students*. Relevant measures include reducing homework and changing difficult teaching content. However, it is evident that the results have been minimal, as the regulations are not strict enough, leading to schools and off campus teachers ignoring these measures. In this case, the Double Reduction Policy emerged as the most stringent burden reduction policy in History of China [11]. The Double Reduction Policy is simply the first phase of China's education reform; there is still more work to be done.

### 3. Conclusion

English education has changed dramatically in China since the founding of the People's Republic of China. China's English education had a difficult sequence of decrease, recovery, and stagnation from 1949 and 1976. Due to the growth of international trade following the reform and opening up, people realized the value of English as a language for communication, and a trend of studying the language steadily spread throughout the whole society. The government has also responded to this demand that people want to learn English. English has become one of the compulsory courses in the middle school, and English majors in colleges and universities have also become popular majors. In the process of reform and opening up, English education has developed by leaps and bounds, and there is a trend towards utilitarian development.

In the backdrop of economic globalization, China has taken an unprecedented stance in participating in international political, economic, and cultural exchanges, and society has also advanced greater standards for English education. Institutions for teaching English have appeared in this setting. The Double Reduction Policy, which lessens students' homework burden at the national level, was created in response to excessive homework in schools and the stress it placed on classes outside of the classroom. The audience for this paper is teachers and students who aim to know the general introduction of the development of foreign language education in China from 1949 to 2021, with focus on English and Russian. This paper mentions the Double Reduction Policy for enabling people to realize the importance of all round development of children, and thus creating a healthy language learning environment in the future. This paper could inspire teachers to strive for better teaching plan in language teaching.

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