

# *Research on Promoting the Diversification of Foreign Languages in Basic Education to Enhance National Language Capacity*

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**Abstract:** Capacity in language variety is an integral part of the national language capacity. Promoting the diversification of foreign languages in basic education enhances national language capacity. The paper reviews the historical development of foreign language education in China's basic education, which has gone from having only two languages, Russian and English, to having six languages, English, Russian, Japanese, French, German, and Spanish as basic education subjects. Besides, the paper points out the current situation of foreign language education in China's basic education: a small variety of foreign languages are offered, and the quality of teaching and learning is uneven. Finally, two measures are proposed to address the shortcomings: one is to promote the diversification of foreign languages in basic education based on the needs of the country and society, and the other is to guarantee adequate teaching staff.

## 1. Introduction

National language capacity refers to the sum of a country's ability to use language resources, provide language services, deal with language issues, and develop related things, which is an integral part of national strength and plays a vital role in national construction, development, and security.<sup>[1]</sup> National language capacity is also an essential factor in ensuring national security. The lack of national language capacity may pose a potential threat to national security. Improving national language capacity contributes to the dynamic and preventive management of establishing and implementing national language strategies.<sup>[2]</sup>

Language capacity has various dimensions and encompasses several aspects, such as the domestic and international status of the standard spoken and written language, capacity in automatic language processing and machine translation, and national capacity to mobilize linguistic resources. Among these, the capacity for language variety is a very important one. Various literatures have included language variety in the extension of national language capacity.

Li (2011) depicts the extension of national language capacity in five aspects, the first of which is capacity in language variety. Li points out that capacity in language variety includes varieties of languages that a country is able to master, the number of talents in each language, the rationality of the layout of language varieties and the talents, and so on.<sup>[3]</sup> Zhao (2015) argues that national language capacity consists of the capacity to possess language resources, including foreign language resources.

Wei(2015) argues that the composition of national language capacity includes the number and level of national mastery of language variety and the number and distribution of talents in various languages.<sup>[4]</sup> Wen (2016) divided national language capacity into five sub-capacities: management capacity, control capacity, creativity, development capacity, and expansion capacity. Two of the evaluation indicators of creativity are practical and scientific capacity, with practical capacity referring to the ability to implement the national shortage of language talents program and scientific capacity referring to the effectiveness in developing language talents, both of which are related to language variety.<sup>[5]</sup>

In summary, capacity in language variety is an essential component of national language capacity. Li (2021) points out that five conditions need to be met for a country to master a language: 1) To know the language and the culture in which it is embedded, as well as the people who use it; 2) Classic texts in this language are available in Chinese translation; 3) Sufficient translators are available to meet the translation needs between Chinese and this language; 4) There are specialists in the study of the language and culture who have developed disciplines and can offer courses; 5) To master modern information technology in this language.<sup>[6]</sup> Therefore, individual language capacity is the foundation of national language capacity. The promotion of language diversity, starting in basic education, will increase the number of languages mastered by nationals and will be conducive to national language capacity.

## 2. History of the Development of Foreign Language Variety in Basic Education in China

*The Interim Teaching Program for Secondary Schools (Draft)*, issued in August 1950, states that “Junior and senior secondary schools are required to offer a foreign language program, either English or Russian ..... If the conditions of teachers, teaching materials, etc. are met, it is appropriate to offer Russian. If the conditions of Russian are not met, it is reasonable to teach English temporarily.” This shows that at the beginning, foreign language education in Chinese basic education was focused on Russian, and only two languages were available.

*Notice of Changes in the Establishment of Certain Subjects and the Number of Class Hours in Secondary Schools*, issued in 1954, mentions: “Foreign language courses are not offered in junior high schools for the time being, and Russian or English is taught in senior high schools, depending on the specific conditions.” Until *Notice on the Secondary School Teaching Program for the 1957-1958 school year* issued in 1957 proposed the introduction of a foreign language subject in junior secondary schools for the first time.

In July 1956, the Ministry of Education issued the *Notice on Foreign Language Subjects in Secondary Schools*, stating“.....Attention must be paid to expanding and strengthening the teaching of foreign languages in secondary schools. From the autumn of 1956 onwards, wherever there is a good supply of English teachers, English classes should be added from the first year of high school. The proportion of various foreign languages in secondary schools can be set at about one-third of schools teaching Russian and two-thirds teaching English and other foreign languages.” It shows that China began to shift the focus of foreign language teaching to English.

In 1962, the Ministry of Education issued the *Opinions on Issues Related to the Opening of Foreign Language Subjects in Elementary Schools*, which proposed: “With the guarantee of foreign language teachers in full-time secondary schools, it is generally appropriate to offer foreign languages in the fourth and fifth grades of five-year primary schools, while six-year primary schools may offer foreign language subjects in the fifth and sixth grades.” This was the first time a foreign language program had been proposed for primary schools.

*The Seven-Year Plan for Foreign Language Education*, drawn up in 1964, established English as the first foreign language. At the same time, efforts were made to adjust the ratio of language varieties offered in foreign language courses in secondary schools, with an appropriate contraction in the number of students studying Russian and a reasonable increase in the number of students studying

French, Spanish, Arabic, Japanese, and German. During this period, more attention was paid to other language varieties.

*The Trial Draft of the Teaching Program for Full-time Six-Year Key Secondary Schools*, issued in 1981, mentions that “foreign language courses in secondary schools are respectively offered in English or Russian, Japanese, etc.” For the first time, Japanese was listed alongside English and Russian. In July 1982, the Ministry of Education issued *Opinions on Strengthening Foreign Language Education in Secondary Schools*, stating, “From a national point of view, English should be the main language, Russian should account for a certain proportion, and Japanese may be offered appropriately in schools with qualified teachers.” This shows that the status of the Japanese has indeed risen.

In 1983, foreign languages (including English, Russian, Japanese, German, French, and Spanish) were officially included in the subjects of the college entrance examination and were credited to the total score with raw marks.

In the late 1980s, the Ministry of Education initiated work on nine-year compulsory education syllabi and developed junior secondary school syllabi for English, Russian, and Japanese.

In 2001, the Ministry of Education issued *Guidelines on the Active Promotion of English Language Courses in Primary Schools*, which decided to make the introduction of English language programs in primary schools an important element of basic education reform at the beginning of the 21st century. Starting in autumn 2001, English language courses were gradually introduced in primary schools in cities and counties throughout China. *Guidelines on the Active Promotion of English Language Courses in Primary Schools* aims to promote universal access to foreign language programs in primary schools but in a single language.

In 2003, the Ministry of Education issued *the General High School Curriculum Program (Experimental)*, which sets out curriculum programs for three foreign languages: English, Russian, and Japanese.<sup>[7]</sup>

In 2011, the Ministry of Education issued *Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education in Chinese Subject and Other Subjects (2011 Edition)*, which includes curriculum standards for English, Japanese and Russian.<sup>[8]</sup>

In 2017, the Ministry of Education issued *the General High School Curriculum Program and Curriculum Standards for Chinese Subject and Other Subjects (2017 Edition)*, which includes six foreign languages: English, Japanese, Russian, German, French, and Spanish. The 2017 edition set curriculum standards for German, French and Spanish for the first time, marking a significant step forward in the language diversity of foreign language education in China’s basic education.<sup>[9]</sup>

### 3. Current Situation of Foreign Language Education in China

#### 3.1 Overall Situation

On the whole, the current situation of foreign language education in China can be summarized as follows: a small number and an uneven distribution of foreign languages, and a low level of mastery of most languages.

The lack of capacity in language variety in China is manifested first and foremost in the small number of foreign languages mastered. By 2011, China had mastered no more than 100 foreign language varieties, was able to offer no more than 50 foreign language courses, and had only 10 or so foreign languages available on a regular basis. By 2014, of the 175 countries with which China has diplomatic relations, about 95 languages were commonly spoken, while China was able to offer courses in only 54 languages. By 2020, Beijing Foreign Studies University had opened all the official languages of the countries that have diplomatic relations with China, totaling 101. Even so, there is still a big gap between the language diversity in China and the United States. The United States masters 380 languages, colleges and universities offer courses in 276 non-common foreign languages, and the National Security Agency has built a corpus of more than 500 foreign languages.<sup>[10]</sup>

Secondly, the overall teaching quality is not high, and the overall level of foreign language learners

is low. English is the language with the largest number of learners in China, and it is also the most popular foreign language major in colleges and universities. However, there is still a shortage of high-level English-speaking talents in China.

Thirdly, there is an uneven distribution of teaching resources and learners across languages. According to the survey, about 94% foreign language learners in China study English, 7% Russian and 3% Japanese<sup>[11]</sup>. English is overwhelmingly dominant.

In addition, there is a lack of multidisciplinary talents, including multilingual talents and “specialty plus foreign language” talents.

### 3.2 Current Situation of Foreign Languages in Basic Education in China

In this section, we will make a horizontal comparison of foreign language education in China and abroad during the basic education period.

From the language variety point of view, Wen (2014) mentions that France offers 9 foreign languages in primary schools, 18 foreign languages in junior high schools, and 30 foreign languages as compulsory subjects and 58 foreign languages as optional subjects in senior high schools<sup>[12]</sup>. Zeng & Zhao (2018) compares the foreign language curricula of primary schools in the United States, Japan, South Korea, Russia, Germany, Spain, France, India, and China, finding that among them, foreign language variety in primary school curricula in Asian countries is relatively homogeneous and dominated by English, whereas in European countries there is a wider choice of 2-6 languages in primary schools<sup>[13]</sup>. Based on the *Data Report on Language Education in European Schools 2017*, prepared by the EU Education Data Bank in co-operation with the European Commission, Chen & Wu (2020) estimates the 57 officially recognized regional or minority languages in the EU are used as target languages in language courses in half of the EU countries<sup>[14]</sup>.

However, as of now, foreign language education at all stages of basic education in China has English as the main language, with only Japanese and Russian as the minor languages included in the curriculum standards for junior high school, and only Japanese, Russian, German, French and Spanish as the minor languages included in the curriculum standards for senior high school.

There are also some gaps in terms of the quality of learning. Wen (2014) states that French junior high school students graduate with a B1 standard for their first foreign language and an A2 standard for their second foreign language, senior high school students graduate with a B2 standard for their first foreign language and a B1 standard for their second foreign language, and arts students in senior high schools are required to take an advanced first foreign language to a C1 standard and an advanced second foreign language to a B2 standard. While according to Zou's study(2016) on the level matching between English in the college entrance examination and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the difficulty of listening in English in the college entrance examination is about the A2 standard, and the difficulty of reading reaches about the B1 standard, which is much lower than the level of the foreign language of French high school students<sup>[15]</sup>.

The small number of foreign languages at the basic education level and students' lack of understanding of many foreign languages have created certain obstacles to foreign language learning at the higher education level. Therefore, in order to break the disadvantage of insufficient level of students trained in foreign languages in higher education, we have to start from basic education.

## 4. Measures to Promote Linguistic Diversity in Basic Education

### 4.1. Identify the Foreign Language Needs of the Country and Society

In 2006, the United States announced *the National Security Language Initiative*, which supports U.S. citizens in learning languages critical to U.S. national security, including Arabic, Chinese, Korean, and Japanese. From 2009 to the present, the U.S. Department of Education has published 78 critical languages covering seven key regions: Africa, the Middle East, Central Asia, East Asia, South

Asia, Eastern Europe, and Latin America. The British Council published two foreign language planning reports in 2013 and 2017, building on the national development strategy and listing the top ten languages that the U.K. will need in the future to encourage national learning. This reveals to us that the importance of more than 7,000 foreign languages is not equal and that countries should prioritize languages critical to their security and development.

Zhang (2011) adopted the method of frequency statistics, taking into account politics, economy, comprehensive national power and education, information security, geography, and language ontology, to include 27 languages as critical foreign languages in China<sup>[16]</sup>. Gao (2014) identified 24 languages as the critical foreign languages for the development of the “Belt and Road” in China, based on the radiation scope of the New Silk Road Economic Belt and the official languages of the relevant countries<sup>[17]</sup>. Yu (2016) identified the critical languages of Yunnan Province, 11 in total, using frequency statistics based on the specific regional situation of Yunnan Province, including regional organizations, sub-regional organizations, trade partnerships, comprehensive national power, the number of students studying abroad, Chinese diaspora and language ontology<sup>[18]</sup>.

Li (2019) classifies world languages into six categories based on five indicators and one reference item, namely, globally used languages, international and regional languages, national or official languages, vital local languages, other minor languages, and cultural languages. Of these, globally used languages, international and regional languages are about 20, and globally used languages, international and regional languages, national or official languages, and vital local languages are about 200.<sup>[19]</sup> Based on this categorization, Li (2021) identifies that China's national linguistic capacity should be 20/200, where “20” refers to the need for about 20 languages to acquire advanced knowledge in the world and to participate in world governance, and “200” refers to the need for about 200 languages to tell the world the story of China, to promote the high-quality development of the “Belt and Road”, and to build a Community with a Shared Future for Humanity.

Through a questionnaire survey, Dai (2016) found that the number of people required to be proficient in a foreign language in work units is much higher than the number of people available, with the former being about 2.31 times higher than the latter. The most commonly used languages in work units are English, Japanese, Russian, French, Spanish, German, Arabic, Vietnamese, Malay, Turkish, Ukrainian and Persian. The languages with the most significant shortage of human resources are English, Spanish, Russian, French, German, Japanese, Arabic, Portuguese, Vietnamese, Ukrainian, Persian, Hausa, Turkish, Malay, Italian, Laotian, Cambodian, Thai, Mongolian, Burmese, and Korean.

The Ministry of Education should refer to the above needs and seize the main contradictions when conducting language planning for foreign language education. It is essential to consider the top priority foreign languages in the foreign language planning for basic education.

## 4.2 Guarantee of Teachers

There is a lack of teachers in foreign language education in China, especially in minority languages, and the level of teachers is insufficient. In order to guarantee the quality of foreign language teachers in basic education, it is necessary to improve the training programs for foreign language majors in higher education institutions and to improve students' foreign language proficiency and ability. Wang (2020), put forward the following suggestions: clarifying professional selection criteria; providing training opportunities through multi-departmental cooperation; providing a flexible appointment system; providing suitable space for post-service development; and providing multi-dimensional protection.

In addition, efforts should be made to develop learning resources, improve the preparation of teaching materials, and develop teaching materials for minority languages for which there are no standardized teaching materials; offer elective courses in foreign languages so that students can be exposed to more languages and be inspired to learn foreign languages; and improve the language test, to genuinely improve students' linguistic ability instead of their ability to sit for exams.

## 5. Conclusion

The small variety and low level of foreign language education in China is related to the fact that the choice of foreign languages at the basic education level is relatively homogeneous. However, from the point of view of historical development, the number of foreign languages offered in our basic education is increasing. On this basis, we should continue to promote the diversification of foreign languages in basic education, lay a solid foundation for foreign language education in higher education, and train high-level linguistic talents to enhance the national language capability.

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