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A Study on the Value and Willingness of Multilingual Foreign Language Learning Among County Senior High School Students

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Abstract

The promulgation of curriculum standards for foreign language subjects, such as German and French, marks a new historical stage in China's basic education system for multilingual foreign language education. As a crucial factor influencing the overall development of basic education in China, the adoption of multilingual foreign language teaching in county senior high schools is still insufficient. The development of multilingual education in high schools not only taps into students' language potential and improves their overall literacy, but also facilitates schools in achieving distinctive and diversified development through the implementation of multilingual foreign language courses. This, in turn, promotes alignment with university foreign language education and contributes to the overall development of the country. The study of senior high schools in some counties in Shaanxi Province found that students are more willing to learn multiple foreign languages and generally hold an optimistic attitude toward the prospect of learning them. Among the five foreign languages other than English, Japanese is the most popular language among students. Cultural interest is the most important factor influencing their language choice. In order to effectively promote multilingual teaching in county senior high schools, it is essential to develop well-thought-out policies for multilingual foreign language education. This should be done by assessing the demand for multilingual learning and by training high-quality teachers and establishing adequate multilingual education resources based on the specific circumstances.

Keywords

County senior high schools, multilingual foreign language learning, learning willingness

1. Introduction

With the high-quality development of China's "One Belt, One Road" construction and the increasingly close international exchanges, the construction of a Community of Shared Future for Mankind has become an important proposition in this era, which makes it urgent to cultivate multilingual talents. In 2017, the Ministry of Education promulgated the "General High School Curriculum Program and Curriculum Standards for Languages and Other Subjects" (2017 edition), allowing schools to choose the first foreign language on their own, while encouraging schools to create conditions to open a second foreign language and develop multilingual education. Besides, candidates can choose one of the six foreign language subjects among English, Japanese, Russian, German, French, and Spanish to take part in the College Entrance Examination, which means high school multilingual education ushered in a new stage of development. This is an

important measure to meet the needs of China's further expansion and opening up to the outside world, and is also an important initiative to cultivate transnational talents with Chinese sentiment, international vision, and multiculturalism, highlighting the important position of multilingual education in secondary education. Promoting the high-quality development of county senior high schools is an important part of China's education development nowadays. Therefore, this study intends to explore the value implication of multilingualism among county senior high school students and find out their views on multilingualism.

2. Literature review

A review of related literature reveals that researchers have focused their attention on multilingual education at the secondary level mainly in two aspects: multilingual teaching and multilingual foreign language planning.

2.1 Research on multilingual teaching at secondary schools

The provision of multilingual learning at secondary schools in China is currently not widespread and is mainly concentrated in developed cities. Shanghai is currently the city with the largest number of multilingual schools and the largest number of foreign languages offered in primary and secondary schools in China. With the support of the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, Shanghai launched a non-common language learning program for primary and secondary school students in 2014. After several years of piloting and practicing, there are some achievements, such as Shanghai Cao Yang Second Middle School, and Shanghai Ganquan Foreign Language Middle School (Shu Dingfang, 2021). Most of the researchers are investigating the current situation of multilingual teaching and learning in secondary schools in a certain region, finding the shortcomings in current multilingual teaching, and putting forward some corresponding suggestions. For example, Wu Yuqi (2011) surveyed a random sample of more than twenty secondary schools offering multilingual courses in nine districts in Shanghai to find out the status of multilingual courses offered in Shanghai secondary schools. Huang Yong (2021) found that there is a lack of practical teaching activities in multilingual teaching in Jinhua, Zhejiang province. The provision of Japanese and Spanish courses in Sichuan Province suffers from insufficient coordination among educational administrations, an inadequate curriculum system, and an inadequate teaching materials system (Xie Yu & Dong Hongdan, 2022). At the same time, the introduction of multilingual courses at senior high school is a meaningful practice for the lifelong development of students, the development of the school and our country (Zhang Aiqin, 2018).

2.2 Research on planning multilingual learning

The policies of other countries on multilingual learning of basic education have gained the attention of researchers in China, to a certain extent, these policies have also provided a reference for the development of multilingual learning in China. In recent decades, The European Union has issued a series of documents and even regulations to guide and regulate the practice of multilingual education in EU countries (Xu Kewang & Wang Hongliang, 2014). In France, foreign language education is divided into first, second, and third foreign languages, which are studied in elementary, middle, and high school respectively. When students take the entrance exam, the foreign language test can be selected among the 44 foreign languages (Zhang Jingtao & Zhao Rongai, 2017). In 2006, the United States proposed a "Critical Language" strategy aimed at safeguarding national security, including Arabic, Chinese, Korean, Russian, Hindi, Japanese, Persian, and Turkish, and developed a series of specific programs to ensure the smooth implementation of this strategy (Li Li, 2019). The Federal Cabinet of India has promulgated the National Education Policy 2020, which aims to enrich the multilingual teaching system and provide foreign language courses in Korean, Japanese, Thai, French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, and Russian except Hindi and English (Zhang Tianwei, 2021).

2.3 The shortcomings of existing studies

In summary, research on multilingual education in basic education in China is far from adequate. Most of the existing studies have investigated and analyzed specific developed areas or explored the value and path of multilingual education in middle schools, or illustrated the deficiency of multilingual education in China from the perspective of foreign language education policies in other countries. Given the fact that multilingual education in the county senior high school is not yet popular, this study intends to analyze the willingness of students to learn multilingualism in-country senior high schools in Shanxi Province based on an analysis of the beneficial value of multilingualism. Besides, this study aims to understand senior high school students' views and understanding of multilingualism, in the hope of providing a reference for the opening of multilingual courses in county senior high schools.

3. The significance and value of multilingual learning for county senior high school students

3.1 Students: Exploring students' language potential and promoting the improvement of comprehensive literacy

In 2018, the educational goals of "cultivating people by virtue" and "core literacy" made students' literacy become the focus of education, and cultivating the key abilities and necessary characters needed by society has become the current teaching goal of all disciplines. On the basis of fully developing students' language potential, the multilingual education carried out in senior high schools should also pay attention to cultivating students' core qualities and implementing the fundamental task of building morality and cultivating people.

Firstly, multilingual learning enriches students' knowledge systems. Increasing multilingual teaching not only provides students with more opportunities to choose subjects but also enriches students' language knowledge system. In addition, students can expand their knowledge of geography, history, and other aspects through multilingual learning, which will make them transfer and integrate knowledge effectively. Secondly, multilingual learning promotes the development of students' thinking ability. When learning different foreign languages, due to the differences in the language itself, the different descriptions of the same thing and the different points of view expressed will naturally mobilize students to make comparisons, analyze between differences, and understand things from different perspectives, thus improving their thinking abilities.

3.2 School: Building multilingual language courses and promoting school characteristics

The development of senior high school specialization reserves high-quality talents for the optimization of professions in higher education, enhances the basic education quality, and also meets students' needs with different potentials. In addition, the release of the "Outline of the National Medium and Long-term Education Reform and Development Plan (2010-2020)" provides a policy basis for the characteristic development of senior high schools. It is an important measure to implement multilingual courses for students to implement the characteristic development of senior high schools.

Firstly, the construction of multilingual courses enriches the content of secondary education. In the latest senior high school curriculum scheme, schools can independently choose the first foreign language and are encouraged to create conditions to open a second foreign language course. Secondly, the construction of multilingual courses promotes the cultivation of high-quality multilingual talents. The current "major plus minor" talent cultivation model at university makes it easier to achieve the goal of cultivating high-quality composite talents if multilingual courses are set up at the high school so that learners have basic multilingual knowledge before entering university.

3.3 Nation: Strengthening the cohesion of multilingual education and meeting the needs of international development

The new round of technological and industrial revolution has intensified global competition, based on which the interaction of ideas, cultures, and ideologies of various nationalities around the world is more frequent than ever. Facing such fierce competition, multilingual majors cover a wide range of areas and can constantly meet the needs of the country, society, and the people. Especially in the new era of building socialism with Chinese characteristics, it plays an important role in language input and export and undertakes the historical mission and responsibility in the era of major-country diplomacy.

From the perspective of domestic development, China is currently at an important historical point to achieve the "two hundred years" goal and realize the Chinese dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation. The construction of socialism with Chinese characteristics not only provides a broad stage for the cultivation of multilingual talents but also puts forward a new mission requirement—for how to build a multilingual curriculum system with Chinese characteristics, proactively adapt to the educational policy of "building morality and cultivating people" in all aspects. However, the current development of foreign language majors at universities is completely cut off from senior high school education. The development of multilingual education at high school is not only a fresh impetus to the development of multilingual majors at universities but also a guarantee for China to actively participate in global governance by reserving talents of different levels and types so that the function of multilingual education can be normalized and systematized thus enhancing China's international voice.

4. Current situation of the multilingual learning willingness of county senior high school students

In terms of study subjects, this study used random sampling to survey high school students in some counties in Shaanxi

Province, and a total of 307 valid questionnaires were collected. Among them, 147 were male students and 160 were female students.

As for the research instrument, this study mainly draws on the questionnaire on the Intention to Learn Minor Languages developed by Li Lisheng and designs a relevant questionnaire to investigate the intention of county senior high school students to learn Japanese, French, German, Russian, and Spanish. The questionnaire consists of three parts. The first part is the basic personal information, including gender, grade, and place of origin; the second part contains four questions to understand the senior high school student's understanding of the foreign language policy of the college entrance examination, their views on the prospect of learning multilingualism, and whether they are willing to learn other languages; the third part is the main part of the questionnaire, which is designed on a five-point Likert scale based on three dimensions: the practicality of learning multilingualism, the relative advantages of multilingualism and cultural interest. Through SPSS statistical analysis, the Cronbach's α of each language is 0.950, 0.939, 0.934, 0.948, and 0.950 for Japanese, French, German, Russian, and Spanish, respectively, and the KMO value is 0.942, 0.931, 0.936, 0.951, 0.946, and Bartlett's test of significance for sphericity is 0.000, which is less than 0.01 and reaches the significance level, suitable for further analysis.

4.1 Understanding the relevant policies of the college entrance examination and be optimistic about learning prospects

The 2020 Regulations on Enrollment of Colleges and Universities clearly state that "The foreign languages in the national unified examination subjects are divided into six languages, including English, Russian, Japanese, French, German, and Spanish, and candidates can choose any one of them to take the examination." Some high schools in developed cities, with the support of relatively perfect multilingual education policies, have high-quality teachers, advanced teaching environments, and related international exchange programs, which can provide high-quality multilingual teaching for students in the region. However, although there are still some difficulties in popularizing multilingual education under the existing conditions, most students of senior high schools in counties are relatively familiar with the foreign language examination policy of the college entrance examination and have an optimistic attitude toward the prospect of multilingual learning.

In terms of knowledge of the foreign language examination policy, the survey results show that "I know that high school students can take the foreign language examination in any of the following languages: Japanese, French, German, Russian, and Spanish." 46.9% of students chose the "totally agree" option and 17.3% chose the "agree" option for this question. Overall, despite the lack of opportunities to study other languages in school, the vast majority of senior high school students in the county have some knowledge and understanding of the foreign language examination policy. In terms of their views on the prospect of learning multiple languages, 51.792% and 33.876% of students chose the "totally agree" and "agree" options respectively, indicating that the majority of students are optimistic about the future development of learning the other five languages, and believe that learning other languages can also lead to good professional and employment choices.

4.2 Having a strong willingness to learn other foreign languages, with Japanese being the most popular among students

From the results of the questionnaire, it is obvious that students have a high level of willingness to learn other foreign languages. "If the school could offer classes like Japanese, French, German, Russian, or Spanish, I would choose one of them." In this question, 47.231% of senior high school students indicated that they would prefer to study one of Japanese, French, German, Russian, or Spanish if they were offered the corresponding course. Second only to this is the 19.87% of students who were also generally in favor of learning the other five foreign languages. It can be seen that the vast majority of high school students expressed a strong willingness to learn the other five foreign languages, which will be conducive to the popularization of multilingual education in county senior high schools.

Table 1. Students' knowledge of foreign language policy in the college entrance examination

Item	Option	Number	Percentage	Effective percentage	Cumulative percentage
I know that high school students can take the foreign language examination in any of the following languages: Japanese, French, German, Russian, and Spanish.	Totally agree	144	46.9	46.9	46.9
	Agree	53	17.3	17.3	64.2
	Not sure	66	21.5	21.5	85.7
	Disagree	22	7.2	7.2	92.8
	Totally disagree	22	7.2	7.2	100.0
Total		307	100.0	100.0	

Table 2. Students' view on the prospect of multilingual learning

Item	Option	Number	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
I think the prospect of learning 5 other foreign language is nice.	Totally agree	159	51.792	51.792
	Agree	104	33.876	85.668
	Not sure	20	6.515	92.182
	Disagree	12	3.909	96.091
	Totally disagree	12	3.909	100
Total		307	100.000	100.000

Table 3. Willingness to learn other foreign languages

Item	Option	Number	Percentage	Cumulative percentage
If the school could offer class like Japanese, French, German, Russian, or Spanish, I would choose one of them.	Totally agree	145	47.231	47.231
	Agree	61	19.87	67.101
	Not sure	57	18.567	85.668
	disagree	23	7.492	93.16
	Totally disagree	21	6.84	100
Total		307	100.000	100.000

On the basis of understanding that students have a strong desire to learn multilingual, it is crucial to further analyze which language is more popular among students, which will provide a certain reference for the formulation of some policies of education supervisors and the construction of school curriculum. In this study, the mean and standard deviation of the scores of the five languages are presented from three dimensions: the practicality of learning multilingualism, the relative advantages of multilingualism, and cultural interest. In terms of the practicality of multilingual learning, Japanese ranked first among the five languages with a mean value of 3.4126 (SD: 0.91720); in terms of relative advantages of multilingual learning, Japanese ranked first among the five languages with a mean value of 3.5762 (SD: 0.9721), followed by German, Russian, Spanish, and French; in terms of cultural interest, Japanese ranked first with a mean value of 3. 1786 (SD: 0.9125) ranked first among the five languages, followed by Russian with a mean value of 3.0321 (SD: 0.9101). In general, the majority of high school students expressed a strong interest and willingness to learn Japanese for whatever reason. Japanese was the most popular foreign language in the survey samples.

4.3 Cultural interest is the most important factor influencing language choice

According to the analysis of the literature, it is clear that three main factors that influence high school students' willingness and motivation to learn other foreign languages are the practicality of learning multilingualism, the relative advantages of learning multilingualism, and cultural interest. The practicality of multilingualism refers to that students choose to learn a language because of its practical value and benefits, such as for the convenience of finding a job or for the need to study abroad. The relative advantage of multilingualism is that students can achieve better academic performance in the language they choose compared to learning English. Cultural interest is to point out that they are interested in the culture of other countries and want to learn the language of the country, so as to further understand and learn the society and culture of the country, including film and television programs, music, social customs, tourism and so on.

The comparative analysis of the five languages concluded that Japanese was the most popular language for senior high school students among the five languages. On this basis, the comparison of the mean and standard deviation analysis of Japanese shows that the mean of the score on the factor of cultural interest is 3.4538 (SD: 0.91580), which is significantly higher than the other two influencing factors; followed by the relative advantage of multilingual learning with a mean of 3.2781(SD: 0.8735); in comparison, the score of practicality of multilingual learning is low, with a mean of 3.1109 (SD: 0.8824). Therefore, it can be concluded that cultural interest is the most important factor influencing students' choice to study Japanese. China and Japan are separated by a narrow strip of water and have a long history of interaction as well as similar cultural values and social environments. Not only Japanese anime is popular among Chinese young people, but Japanese characters and Chinese characters have certain similarities and connections. These may be the essential reasons for students to choose to learn Japanese.

5. Suggestions for multilingual foreign language learning of county senior high school students

5.1 In-depth examination of multilingual learning needs and integrated planning of foreign language education policies

The development of multilingual education in senior high schools is inseparable from the understanding of students' learning needs. Compared with the senior high schools in developed cities, the demand and development of multilingual education in county senior high schools are special due to the disparities and deficiencies in economy, culture, and educational resources. Therefore, in order to successfully promote multilingual education in county high schools, relevant researchers and government departments should consider the actual local situation and investigate the different conditions of foreign language use and demand in each region. Only by obtaining and mastering reliable data, can they put forward feasible suggestions for the planning and construction of multilingual courses in county senior high schools and formulate scientific multilingual education planning.

On the basis of examining the demand for multilingual learning and use, foreign language education policies should be formulated by combining the reduction of regional disparities with the exploitation of regional differences. Firstly, in the face of regional disparities in educational level and resources due to uneven economic development, government agencies should provide appropriate policy, financial, and human resources support to economically disadvantaged regions to help senior high schools develop multilingual education from a material perspective. Secondly, government departments should recognize regional differences, make reasonable use of the geographical and cultural advantages of different regions, and develop targeted and reasonable multilingual education plans according to the actual situation of each region.

5.2 Strengthening the training of multilingual teachers and improving their professional quality

High-quality multilingual teachers are a fundamental prerequisite and guarantee for carrying out multilingual teaching. Colleges and universities are the main training ground for multilingual teachers in China, and graduates choose to teach non-English foreign language subjects in primary and secondary schools or specialized foreign language schools after completing their studies, but in most cases, these foreign language teachers often graduate from non-normal universities, and although they have mastered certain language knowledge and skills, they lack training related to teaching theory and teaching practice and have difficulties in transferring knowledge in teaching practice. Therefore, in order to deliver high-quality multilingual teachers to senior high schools, higher education institutions should establish close cooperation with county senior high schools. The various language majors in universities can offer targeted education courses for students who want to be teachers in secondary schools in the future, combining language learning, cultural learning, and educational teaching practice to cultivate students' educational practice skills.

For in-service teachers, school administrators should bring in outstanding talents based on the actual comprehensive situation of our school, reasonably expand the teaching staff, and focus on improving the comprehensive quality of multilingual teachers. On the one hand, schools should introduce multilingual teachers appropriately based on the construction of multilingual courses and the general situation of school development, and gradually improve the multilingual teaching staff of schools. On the other hand, the professional competence and teaching level of multilingual teachers are vital factors related to their professional development. In developing multilingual education, attention should be paid to changing teachers' teaching concepts and teaching methods, so as to continuously improve their professional quality.

5.3 Building high-quality multilingual teaching resources to facilitate the smooth implementation of teaching

The successful implementation of multilingual education cannot be achieved without the support of high-quality and rich teaching resources, including the development of multilingual teaching materials and the construction of online learning resource platforms. First of all, teaching materials are the prerequisite for multilingual education. At present, there are no national textbooks for French, German, and Spanish, except for Japanese and Russian, and the quality of these textbooks varies, which has a significant impact on the effectiveness of multilingual teaching. The compilation of multilingual teaching materials should first take into account the cognitive ability, learning time, and learning pressure of high school students, and on this basis, correspond to the national curriculum standards, which should be used as a guide for the development of multilingual teaching materials under the organization and support of the state.

Secondly, high-quality and diversified multilingual teaching resources not only provide convenience for teachers' teaching but also provide students with opportunities for independent learning. On the one hand, the construction and sharing of multilingual teaching resources should improve the openness of foreign language resources in higher education

institutions and strengthen the cooperation and connection between universities and senior high schools, so as to better realize the docking of foreign language education resources. In this way, students can learn more in-depth and extensive knowledge and information about their chosen language or languages of interest based on the existing educational resources in schools. On the other hand, the construction of a resource platform for middle school multilingual education should be accelerated. As an important supplement to the curriculum, the development and construction of a multilingual online learning resource platform is an essential initiative that can effectively improve teaching and learning.

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