

English as First Foreign Language, French as Second Foreign Language in China: Policy and Practice¹

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Abstract

In recent years, increasing numbers of Chinese citizens are learning French, which is one of the most popular second foreign languages in China. In this paper, China's English and French language education policies and their practices are analyzed from the following aspects: historical development of English and French as foreign languages in China; current situation of English (L2) and French (L3) education in China, such as national program, national language tests, etc.; similarities and differences in L2 English and L3 French education. It is found that Policy has a great influence on foreign language education in China. Dramatic increase of English and French education are achieved after its promulgation. However, in terms of the aims of education, the age of learners and their status in China, the two languages are different.

Key words: first foreign language, second foreign language, policy, English, French

Introduction

With increased globalization, command of one, or several foreign languages has become a highly desirable attribute. Until now, the dominant international language globally has been English. In China, English is compulsory in both high school and college and more recently, is being offered in some primary schools; it is the first foreign language (abbreviation: L2) for most students. Other languages such as French, Japanese, German, etc. are offered as a second (abbreviation: L3) or third (abbreviation: L4) foreign language.

Language policy plays a critical role in the development of language education, as defined, for example, by Kaplan & Baldauf (1997): *The exercise of language planning leads to, or is directed by, the promulgation of a language policy by government (or other authoritative body or person). A language policy is a body of ideas, laws, regulations, rules and practices intended to achieve the planned language change in the societies, group or system.*

(Kaplan & Baldauf 1997: xi)

Spolsky (2004 : 5) identifies three components of language policy :

- (1) *language practices - the habitual pattern of selecting among the varieties that make up its linguistic repertoire*
- (2) *language beliefs or ideology - the beliefs about language and language use*
- (3) *any specific efforts to modify or influence that practice by any kind of language intervention, planning or management.*

These definitions show that language policy has a variety of influences, including language practices, ideas, efforts, laws, regulations, etc. In this article, discussion will be limited to the field of state education policy.

The exponential spread of English education in China has received much attention with extensive research and analysis of English education policy, English in China's education system, English for educational migration, etc. (Feng, M. 1995, Wen, Q.-F. & Hu, W.-Z. 2007, Feng A.-W. 2009, Wei R.-N. & Su J.-Z. 2012). The teaching and learning of French in China, however, has been studied very little.

¹ This article is supported by the project "2020 Qingnian Xueshu Bajian Rencai (Tuandui) jihua" (*Young academic talents -group-2020*) of Beijing International Studies University.

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This article reviews briefly previous research into the history of foreign language teaching in China. This is followed by analysis of current English L2 and L3 French education in China, concluding with a comparison of the education status of the two languages. Chinese past and present foreign language education policies, especially English and French, is analyzed. The development of foreign language education policy is an important part of the national policy of a country and is related to the country's political, economic and technological development.

Some summary statistics are presented and changes of education policy are highlighted as an indication of the overall development of English and French as foreign languages in China since the 19th century, clarifying the influence of policy changes. The research provides some references for the multilingual education situation³, especially the learning of French as L3 in China.

1. The history of foreign languages teaching in China

The tradition of foreign language teaching in China dates back to the Yuan Dynasty (1271 - 1368) (Komicki, 2018), seeing expansion after the Second Opium War. At that period the Qing government began setting up foreign language schools, such as Tongwen Guan Beijing (1862), where students began to be taught foreign languages, including English, French, and Russian. The following year, Guang Fangyan Guan Shanghai (1863) was established and, in 1864, also Tongwen Guan Guangzhou, to teach English and, later, French and German (Fu 1986, Geng 2015). Generally speaking, those government schools were set up for purposes of political and economic development.

At that time, the coastal cities and some inland cities in China established commercial ports. The first religious schools were founded and provided English language teaching. Diplomatic contacts and trade between China and Western countries were becoming more frequent and mastery of a foreign language became a priority. In 1867, the Qing government set up the Translation Bureau in Shanghai. According to Bolton (2002), between 1875 and 1911, about 600 Western novels were translated into Chinese. The development of foreign language teaching during this period was to have great influence on its subsequent development.

Following the founding of People's Republic of China (abbreviation: PRC) (1949), language policy and consequently foreign language teaching in China changed radically for a number of reasons. According to Lam (2005) and Zhang (2012), from 1949 to the present, development of foreign language teaching in China has been as follows:

- In the 1950s, Russian was almost the only foreign language in China (influenced by Soviet Union);
- Between 1957-1965, due to a deterioration of relations between China and Russia, and, in parallel, improved relations between China and the United States, English language education became important.
- Between 1966 and 1970, because of the Cultural Revolution, all foreign language teaching was criticized and banned.
- Between 1971 and 1976, China restored the teaching of English.
- In 1977, one year after the end of the Cultural Revolution, the entrance examination for university education was reestablished with English as one of the subjects required, although the result was not counted as part of a candidate's total score. Thenceforth, with the improvement of relations between China and Western countries, and introduction of the "reform and open-door" policy, English became the dominant foreign language in China.
- In 1986, China adopted the "Law of Obligatory Education of the People's Republic of China" making nine years of education compulsory. This law states that all children who are 6 years old (in some remote areas 7 years) must complete nine years of free education. After the implementation of this law, the Chinese government began taking various measures to encourage people to learn English, including the requirement to all public schools to provide English classes for all students. English is now considered one of the three main subjects (the other two being Mathematics and Chinese) for all high school students (college and high school). At university, English courses are included in most programs. Since 1987, two national English tests have been perceived as an extremely important qualification for all Chinese students not majoring in English: these are CET-4 (College English Test - level 4) and CET-6 (College English Test - level 6). The goal of these tests is to examine the English level of university students. In the 1990s, a pass in CET- 4 was necessary to gain a Bachelor's degree in many universities (Feng 1995). Students' pass rate is often linked to the academic reputation of a university. It is also an important criterion for recruitment to both private and public sectors enterprises.

³ Actually, not all citizens of PRC have mandarin as their L1 and a significantly large minority of the population has Mandarin as a second language, for example, Cantonese is different from mandarin in spoken form, and then there are all the other ethnic minority groups in West particularly.

According to the following table, it can be clearly seen that English (93.8%) is the dominant foreign language in China in 2006; other most learned foreign languages are Russian (7.07%), Japanese (2.54%), French (0.29%), German (0.13%) and Arabic (0.13%). Many universities offering foreign languages provide language courses not only in English but also Japanese, and some also French, German or Russian.

Table 1. Proportion of foreign languages learnt by respondents educated from high-school level who have learned foreign languages in China(Source: SGO, 2006:119)

	English	Russian	Japanese	French	Arabic	German	Spanish	Others
China	93.8%	7.07%	2.54%	0.29%	0.13%	0.13%	0.05%	0.16%

For English majors, it is obligatory to choose a second foreign language from the third year in university. The courses offered by universities are, most often, from the four languages mentioned above. Other languages such as Arabic, Czech, Korean, etc. are minority foreign languages and courses are offered by only a small number of foreign language universities or institutes in big cities, such as Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Nanjin. In these foreign language universities, students are trained not only to be language teachers, translators and interpreters, but also to work in the fields of trade, tourism, civil aviation, and so on.

2. English education in China today

With the “reform and open door” strategy, contacts between China and the rest of the world have increased enormously and English is very important in this context. English is the dominant language in secondary education. According to the “Teaching Outline of Junior High School in China” (2010), during the three years of study in junior high school, students must take 4 hours per week of English. In high school, according to “Teaching Outline of High School in China” (2010), they must complete 12 hours of classes per week.

Junior high school students should master 450 to 800 words, depending on the English level of students when they graduate from primary school: some students have 2 years of English courses and some can have 4 years (data from 2010). Students in high school should master about 1950 words, in total from 2400 to 2750 words. That means, for 1950 words, students should not only know their meanings, but also master the usage of these words (Chinese Ministry of Education 2008, 2010). This enables students to construct simple dialogues and to understand medium-level texts.

At college level, 903 higher education institutions offer English as a specialty, representing 77.4% of all higher education institutions in China (Li, 2013); English has become the most common specialty. Furthermore, in some universities, teachers deliver other subject classes through the medium of English (eg. finance, economy, etc.)

In China, English can be seen almost everywhere: on advertisements, packaging, public facilities, etc. In international business, employers identify themselves only by their English name, and communicate in English. We can find many brands that have chosen an English name (or French in more recent years), even if they are of Chinese origin. This is a commercial practice to enhance the image of the product, making it more cosmopolitan for the consumer.

3. French education in China

3.1 The history of French education in China

3.1.1. Before the foundation of PRC (1949)

The beginning of French education in China dates back over a hundred years. From the Qing Dynasty, in 1862, Tongwenguan was established in Beijing; the English section was established first, then the French and Russian sections which were set up in 1863 (Hao, 2013: 71; Taveime, 2004: 364).

Initially, in each section, there were 10 students and 2 professors, a foreign professor who taught the target language and a Chinese professor who taught the Chinese language. Students were required to take monthly, quarterly and annual exams (Zhang, F. 1992). *Register of Tongwen Guan* records that: from 1862 to 1898, it hired 110 full and assistant instructors. Among these, 29 were Chinese, 19 were English, 15 were French, 12 were Russian, 7 were German, and 1 was Japanese.

The rest were instructors of other subjects (Chemistry, Astronomy, Mathematics, etc.) (Hao, 2013: 70). In 1890, due to the Siege of the International Legations, Tongwenguan was closed.

In 1902, the Yixueguan (House of Translation) was established by combination of two institutions: Tongwenguan and Jingshi Daxuetang (which later became Peking University)⁴. This institution provided tuition in 5 languages: French, English, Russian, German and Japanese. The organization of courses became more flexible than before. In addition to foreign language classes, students could now take courses such as History, Mathematics, Philosophy, Geography, etc. Foreign language studies included several components, such as grammar, writing, reading, speaking and translation. The program lasted 5 years.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Catholic missionaries had arrived in China to set up schools and teach French. Most of these missionaries could speak Chinese. They themselves wrote manuals. Today, the oldest existing manual is the *“Introduction à l'étude de la langue française à l'usage des élèves chinois”* (Introduction of French language study for Chinese students, 1884), written by Henri Boucher, a Jesuit missionary (Zhang, F. 1992: 24). This book begins with phonetics and grammar. There are 33 lessons, each of which presents words and phrases along with their Chinese translation. The teaching method was based on grammar and translation. In 1915, a new manual called *“Les leçons de langue française illustrées”* (illustrated French language lessons) of A. Durand, a Jesuit missionary, was published (Xv, 2014: 176). This manual was devoted essentially to oral French.

Then in 1937, Mr. Reclus, Professor at Peking University, published two French textbooks. These are *“Cours de français élémentaire”* (elementary French courses) and *“oeuvres choisies de la littérature française contemporaine”* (Selected text of modern French literature) (Pu & al., 2005). The first includes 36 lessons based on everyday life. The texts consist of dialogues or oral French expressions; some are accompanied by songs and proverbs. The first 6 lessons are devoted to phonetics illustrated in simple sentences. The second one contains selected paragraphs from French literature, which were explained with comments. Both manuals were widely used in high schools before 1949. After the founding of the P.R.C, they were reedited.

3.1.2. Post 1949

Teaching French as a foreign language started to develop again after the founding of the PRC. In the 1960s, the French department of Beijing Foreign Languages Institute prepared, in collaboration with French experts, a French textbook for the first and second academic years. This textbook was introduced at national level. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), higher education was interrupted. Some universities, which continued to offer courses, adapted the textbooks introducing political topics: *“la lutte de classes”* (The classes struggle), *“la révolution”* (the revolution), etc. (Pu & al., 2005). After the Revolution, the Shanghai Foreign Languages University published a manual for the first and second academic years. However, in the third and fourth years, in other universities, different textbooks were used.

As mentioned before, the **“traditional”** foreign language teaching method, **based on grammar**, was adopted for a long time. It was only in 1964 that the audio-visual and audio-oral methods, popular in the United States, began to be introduced in China. After years, teachers perceived the advantages and disadvantages of these methods. Teachers now combine different methods and, in this way, it has become possible for students to acquire both a solid knowledge of grammar and good oral communication skills. The following textbooks mix grammatical and communicative methods together. Today, many more French Language textbooks are being published. Some insisting on grammar, others on oral communication skills. Textbooks written by native speaker French pedagogues are also imported, for example *“Reflets”* *“Taxi”* *“Alter ego”*, etc. These textbooks contain various components: grammar, communication, vocabulary, oral and written exercises, French culture, and so on, introducing students to different aspects of France.

With the development of technology, the equipment used in foreign language classes has also improved. Before the 1970s, in addition to lack of documentation in universities, there was a lack of audio-tapes for listening practice. From 1970 onwards, conditions began to improve: audio-visual rooms became better equipped, language laboratories were installed with computers and headsets. Since 2000, many university classrooms are equipped with a computer, an optical projector and a big screen. With the development of internet, teachers and students have the possibility to watch videos and use computer resources.

⁴ *History and Mission*, Peking university [Online] Available from: <http://sfl.pku.edu.cn/en/list.php?catid=3> [Accessed 10th September 2020].

Furthermore, the quantity and quality of teachers of French has also increased. In the 1950s, there were only a few Soviet professors working as French experts in some important foreign languages universities. From 1960, native French professors began to travel to China non-officially. Indeed, in 1964 diplomatic relations between France and China were officially established. Since 1979, thanks to China's "reform and open door" policy, Chinese teachers have more opportunities to improve their proficiency in French. The French Embassy in China has offered various initiatives to support the activities of Chinese teachers of French in public primary, secondary and university education institutions. There is cooperation with the Université du Mans (France), which offers a DUFLE diploma course (French foreign language university diploma) for Chinese teachers of French. The contents and the assessment system were completely revised in 2013 in order to adapt to the needs of Chinese teachers. The French Embassy also provides French native assistants (students) for a period of 7 to 12 months to support teachers of French.

In 2014, China welcomed 16 French assistants in secondary schools and universities in some regions. Support for publications in scientific journals (*Synergie Chine, Croisements ...*) is also an essential element of this program (Beijing French Embassy, 2015⁵).

3.2 The current status of French teaching in China

Universities with a French section are concentrated in Eastern China. Only 8 provinces, all situated in North or Western China do not offer French specialty at university level (Bel, 2014). Since 2014, in addition to secondary schools and special French language schools, such as the *Alliance française*, there are more than 140 universities that offer a French specialty or have a French department⁶.

3.2.1 Undergraduate

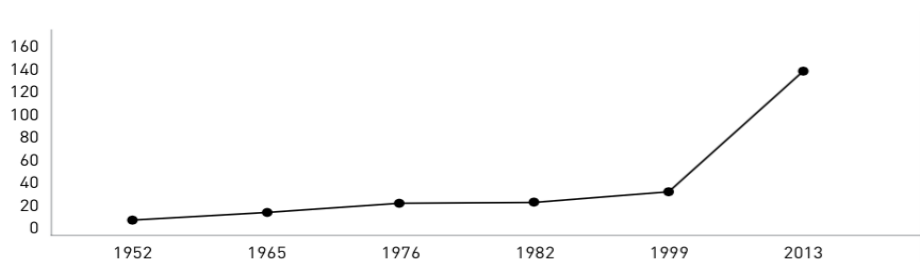
University education generally lasts 4 years in China. The teaching of French is organized as part of the National Program: the first and second years (basic cycle) are devoted to French language learning. Students take 12 to 18 hours of courses per week: these include, for example, phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, writing. During the second year, students must participate in the National French Specialty Test 4 (TFS 4). Generally speaking, most students can pass this exam, which for some universities, is obligatory for obtaining a Bachelor's degree. Many companies require this certification for recruitment. However, for the third and fourth years, the national program gives greater flexibility to the universities. Students can follow courses including linguistics, stylistics, reading the newspapers, French classical and contemporary literature, French civilization, etc. and textbooks vary from one university to another. In 2009, the National Specialty French Test 8 (TFS 8) was set up. Students must take this test in the eighth semester. Finally, Bachelor level study ends with a compulsory internship of several months, as well as writing a final dissertation in French. Note that some universities offer the French specialty for a period of 3 years (the degree is equivalent to the BTS in France), and other universities offer bilingual courses (French-English generally) lasting 5 years at Bachelor level.

To enter university, all students must take the National University Entrance Examination. Chinese universities are classified at different levels. The 1st category of universities (the best) concentrates most on research capacities. The 2nd category includes provincial or municipal universities. The 3rd category effectively brings together private institutions. All these universities offer Bachelor degree, but with very large differences in reputation. It is the score obtained in the National Entrance Examination that allows students to study in a particular university.

The evolution of universities with the French specialty since the PRC's foundation is divided into two major periods, as can be seen in the table below:

⁵ French embassy in China, 2015. *Nos actions en soutien aux enseignants de français langue étrangère*, [Online] Available from: <https://cn.ambafrance.org/Nos-actions-en-soutien-aux-enseignants-de-francais-langue> [Accessed 10th September 2020].

⁶Maurice Gourdault-Montagne, Ambassador of France in China, 2014.

Fig. 1. Number of universities with French specialty 1949-2013

(Source: La langue française dans les université chinoises, élément statistique. Bel, 2014 : 10)

This table shows that, in the 1950s, less than twenty universities offered French specialty. In the following years, the number increased very slightly, reaching around thirty institutions around 2000; until 1999, the number of universities offering French specialty was still limited (only 32 universities) (Bel, 2014).

Since 2000, an impressive development of French language education has taken place. As the Director of *Alliance française de Canton* affirmed : “*Il n’y a dans aucun autre pays un développement du français aussi fort qu’en Chine*”⁷ (there is no other country in which French has developed as fast as in China).

In 2014, there were 143 universities offering the French specialty. On average, each year, 7 universities set up a specialized French section (Bel, 2014). This growth rate is extremely high and unique. During French Language Year in China, Alain Juppé (2011) said of China “*C’est le pays où le nombre de départements de français dans les universités progresse le plus vite au monde, avec une augmentation de 200 % en 8 ans*”. (This is the country where the number of university French departments is growing fastest in the world, with a 200% increase in 8 years).

3.2.2 Post-graduate

French majors have the opportunity to continue post-graduate studies. For this, they should also pass a selective entrance examination. This competition includes French tests, a second foreign language (eg. English) and Politics.

37 Chinese universities offer a French Major Master’s degree. The number of students has reached nearly 700 (Bel, 2014: 14). 23 of these universities are relatively old. It should be noted that all foreign language universities in China offer French Master’s programs. The number of universities offering French Master’s programs is increasing, but not at the same rate as for undergraduate level.

3.2.3 Doctoral

To be admitted to a PhD, post-graduate students must pass another entrance examination, it is also very selective. Only 6 universities can offer Doctoral programs in French language studies (Bel, 2014 : 17). They are highly regarded in the field of foreign language universities, for example Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University and Guangdong University of Foreign Studies. Some of the most common research areas are, for example, French language acquisition, French literature, translation, linguistics, cultural studies.

3.2.4 French as one of the second foreign language choices for English majors or optional courses for other undergraduate students

French can also be taught as a second foreign language for English majors. Normally, English majors pursue three or four semesters of French language learning (2 or 4 hours per week) at undergraduate level. At Master’s and PhD level, if students choose French as their second foreign language, they should also take French courses.

Some Chinese universities have recently begun to offer specialized courses in French, but this is rarely available. Students of Medicine, Management, Tourism, for example, must attend French courses at the same time as studying their specialty. Then, they can study their specialty in French. This type of specialty is often implemented in cooperation with French partners outside China.

⁷ Wikipedia. 2020. *Enseignement du français dans le monde*. [Online] Available from: https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Enseignement_du_français_dans_le_monde#cite_note-33 [Accessed 7th March, 2020].

4. English L2 and French L3 in China : similarities and differences

Having analyzed English and French education in China both from a historical perspectives and regarding their current status, we will now compare acquisition of the two languages in China from different aspects.

4.1 Similarities:

As pointed out in the former analysis, the learning of both English and French as foreign languages began almost at the same time in China: 1862 for the English section and 1863 for the French section at Tongwenguan. Both languages have developed very fast in recent years: over 226,000,000 students in primary and secondary schools and in universities study English, and English language teachers in China are about 850,000 (Wen & Hu, 2007). Regarding French, in 2018, there were about 700-1000 students in primary schools, 13, 000 students in secondary schools, 23,800 – 24,000 students of French major in universities⁸, and 30,000- 35,000 students learning French as second foreign language (Bel, 2018). In all, there are about 67,500 – 73,000 students study French. For French teacher, until 2018, there are about 12,000 teachers in universities (including 200-300 foreign teachers), and 250 in secondary level (Bel, 2018:15). Compared to the large number of students and teachers of English, French is a minority foreign language in China. Nevertheless, there has been a dramatic increase in the number of French departments in universities, with a 340% increase in 15 years (Bel, 2014). Among the foreign students studying in France in 2013-2014, Chinese ranked second. Since 2010, the number of Chinese students has increased 3.6% (*Campus France*, 2014). From 2017, French will be one of the optional subjects for Gaokao (Chinese National Higher Education Entrance Examination) (*Fayushijie*, 2015). It is clear that both English and French language learning have developed very fast in China.

Policy has a great influence on language education in China. The dramatic increase of English learning has occurred since the “reform and open door” policy (1979). This Policy aimed at achieving economic growth through the active introduction of foreign investment and technology. English, as the most used language in the world, is strongly recommended in China: in the 1980s, many students began to learn English from secondary school level, and it is one of three main subjects (Chinese, Mathematics and English) which are obligatory for the University Entrance Examination. Especially important, since 1987 two national English tests, CET-4 (College English Test - level 4) and CET-6 (College English Test - level 6), have been offered for undergraduate students. A pass in CET- 4 was necessary to gain the Bachelor's degree in many universities from the 1990s (Feng, 1995). English has a very important status in China.

French language, being of worldwide importance, has always been one of the most important minority foreign languages in China. However, the number of learners of French has increased dramatically in China in recent decades. An important reason for this is the strengthening of relations between China and Africa. Between 2002 and 2003, trade grew 50%, to 18.5 billion US dollars (Mooney, 2005). In 2014 trade between China and Africa reached 220 billion US dollars (FOCAC, 2016). Such trade requires large number of French-Chinese speakers. According to the report “*la langue française dans le monde 2014*” (French language in the world), 28 countries use French as their official language, of which 25 are in Africa. French language is used in education, administration, media, etc. Michel Grenié, French Embassy in Beijing, said that “*Les entreprises chinoises demandent de plus en plus de francophones pour pouvoir investir en Afrique*” (Chinese companies are asking more and more French speakers to facilitate investment in Africa). For example, in 2005, the China National Petroleum Corporation (CNPC) commissioned the University of Algiers to provide a French language training course for 13 Chinese employees⁹. Increasing numbers of French major graduates choose to work in Africa: in Beijing Foreign Studies University, only 14% of French graduates chose to work in Africa in 2004, but by 2014, the number was one third (Zhu, 2014). In Africa, a new graduate can earn more than six times the average salary for a new graduate in China (Zhu, 2014). The growth of French departments in universities is thus partly a consequence of the increase in trade between China and Africa.

4.2 Differences

- Age of learners

With the development of globalization, and the importance of English-speaking countries, the status of English as an international language cannot be challenged. English language education has been considered particularly important in China since the 1980s.

⁸Including Bachelor and Master level students. Bel, D. (2018) *L'enseignement du/ en français en Asie de l'est et du sud-est*. OIF- Rapport 2018 “la langue française dans le monde”, Organisation internationale de la francophonie:12.

⁹Forum on China-Africa cooperation. [Online] Available from: <http://www.fmprc.gov.cn/zflt/chn/zfyhj/t225423.htm> [Accessed 10th March 2020].

Students begin to learn English at secondary school or even in primary school, whereas French language learning most often begins at university level. Only foreign language secondary schools offer French courses, but English is always the first foreign language. In addition, these schools are very rare in China.

- Status in China

As one of the main subjects for the University Entrance Examination, English is obligatory for students. On graduation from university, English is one of the important skills for recruitment. However, French as a minority language, is offered by some universities as a major; before starting to learn French, such students have normally learned English.

- Aims of education

English language is one of the basic requirements of education in China. Students need to read articles in English. Grammar and vocabulary are considered very important during the teaching process. Actually, many students do not have the opportunity to use English at work. The University Entrance Examination focuses on comprehension of spoken and written English. Oral communication is less important. As regards French, students have 4 years of intensive French courses in university; having the advantage of English language background, which facilitates the learning of French, most students can be expected to reach advanced level after 4 years' study. Additionally, as pointed out above, China needs large numbers of French speakers for its China-Africa trade. Translation and oral communication skills are regarded as important for this and, consequently, French language education tends to focus on these.

Conclusion

China has experienced a period of rapid development in foreign language education. English, as the first foreign language occupies the most important position, with French as a foreign language becoming increasingly important in recent 20 years. Foreign language education policy has undergone tremendous changes after 1949. The language policies changed with the convert of political status and economic goals. This paper has analyzed English and French language education policy in China from a historical perspective, comparing similarities and differences. In China, Policy has a great influence on foreign language education. The promulgation of policies provoked dramatic increase of English and French education in different periods. However, in terms of the aims of education, the age of learners and their status in China, the two languages and different. It is hoped that the paper sheds some light on reasons for the rapid development of two foreign languages' education in China.

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