

Reform on Compulsory Second Language Education of Chinese Universities

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ABSTRACT

China uses Chinese as the official language, while most students take English as a compulsory subject since senior high school to the university level. However, the language education institution is not completely rational. In this paper, a comparison between Japan and China in second foreign language education institutions will be discussed to provide some hints for the compulsory second language institution. And the problems and some possible solutions to improve the situation will be illustrated. The paper will mainly discuss the topic through literature review and comparison. The conclusion will be analyzed from demotivation, available choices of language, and current language tests.

Keywords: *China, Second Language Learning, Compulsory Education, CET, Japan*

1. INTRODUCTION

Students in China will learn English for at least 7 years since senior high school. At the university level, compulsory language lessons take a large proportion of GPA. Moreover, many universities will require students to pass the college English test, band 4 at least, and cannot use other international English test scores as a substitute. Besides, students won't have other compulsory language options other than English and the elective language lessons seldom work. This greatly reduces students' interest in learning other languages. Previous researchers have found the relationships between demotivation and language learning, while also demonstrating that CET is not an ideal way to assess students' language ability. This paper will discuss the compulsory institution and language choices, and try to propose a few possible solutions through literature review and comparison. The meaning of this paper is to make compulsory second language institutions more rational.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. *The present situation of second language education institution in China*

Chinese students are compelled to learn English since primary school. Even if they are qualified to enter

university, the English education would still last for a few years. And the language education in the university is still compulsory by binding the course with a high GPA. In addition, most students in university are forced to pass the CET (College English Test), band 4 at least. Though such force is not judged by the law, it has become a kind of social consensus. However, it could be possible that students are not willing to learn English or attend the CET. According to the data of BEIJING EDUCATION YEAR BOOK published in 2021.3, the candidates for CET, both band 4 and band 6, in Beijing, 2020 were 572168 in all. But there were still 73666 candidates who didn't attend the test in the end. The nonattendance rate was roughly 12%. [1] It's obvious that not every student would like to attend the test.

And it is also an implication that students may lose their passion for learning English. Wang (2018) concluded that the passion of students could be the key factor in English learning. In his research, Wang said that students could lose their passion for the difficulty of English, dearth of interest, and personality. Besides, students were complaining about the content of the lecture. Most of them considered that the things taught in the class were aimed to serve CET rather than learning real English. And he also said that teachers were also suffering from the heavy education burden of CET and boring classes. In the end, Wang also shared some suggestions on the reform, mainly about contents, textbooks and teachers. [2] But Wang only thought about

English education. He didn't discuss how to improve the whole second language education institution and CET to solve the problem from the root.

2.2. The comparison between China and Japan

Considering that the two countries are really similar in some ways. Yoko Kobayashi illustrated the short history of Japan's second foreign language education. In 1991, the government of Japan decided to enhance higher education's individualization and diversification in both 4 years universities and 2 years colleges. They were all allowed to make a discretionary on the number and kinds of compulsory language credits which was required for graduation. As a result, universities are inclined to put more resources on English and some of them even canceled second foreign language education. For example, National Sishu University decided in 2002 that 6 out of the 8 departments would not offer language education but English. Luckily, the government realized

the fault and tried to fix it in the high school by launching a pilot project aiming for the diversification of foreign language education. Though it was an impressive step, the end was that a large number of schools were facing a lack of education history and teachers. As a result, they had to hire part-time teachers and the language lessons besides English was not regarded as a compulsory lesson but as elective one. Not only the school, the students were also found that they didn't have enough passion to learn a second foreign language because it was not examined in the college entrance test. However, there was a trend that Chinese, Korean and other languages gradually took the place of English in the second language learning of Japanese universities in 2009 (Table1). And obviously, East Asian languages took the lead instead of European languages. The author concluded that the demand from Japan business world could be the most important reason.[3]

Table 1 The ranking of non-English foreign languages (FL)in Japan

	Number of universities that offer FL in 2009	Number of high schools that offer FL in 2009	Number of NHK FL textbooks sold in 2010
1	Chinese 607	Chinese 831	Korean 220,000
2	German 543	Korean 420	Chinese 200,000
3	French 541	French 373	French 90,000
4	Korean 430	German 143	German 70,000

It's apparent that universities own more education sources and longer history of second foreign language education than high school. And students also come to realize the meaning of learning a foreign language besides English on account of the employment demand. So second foreign language education is more efficient in universities. Apart from the second foreign language education institution, the Japanese government also made some reforms to the examination of the foreign language tests. Nobuhiro Kamiya has concluded that the English part of NCT (National Center Test) only measures the receptive skills of students in reading and listening in 2017. Thus, NCT is scheduled to be replaced by some commercial and private tests considering that it could not examine the necessary four abilities of language (reading, listening, speaking, and writing) which are expected to be managed through English education in school by the Ministry of Education. And he also made a comparison between NCT and TOEFL Junior Comprehensive. It turned out that the NCT test had more reading ability than TJC, but TJC fitted the demand of the Japanese government better. And the results of the research showed that the score of NCT was quite correlated with the score of TJC, which implied that TJC was qualified to take the place of NCT in the future. And Japanese government is

planning to make the commercial and private tests into implement in university usual tests in 2020 and in the college entrance test in 2024 or so. [5] Back to China, the English part of College Entrance Test has been stable for decades, and has never been challenged by the social language tests. So has CET.

3. PROBLEMS

Above all, the section will list three problems of Chinese second language education institution. And some possible solutions will be proposed in the later part.

3.1. Demotivation

University students are found that they would gradually lose their enthusiasm for learning English in the first academic year, and completely lose interest in the second year. Li and Sun mainly concluded that this phenomenon was mainly caused by the decrease in fresh feelings about school, the content of the class and the teacher. Among the reasons, the teacher could be the most effective reason.[6] But teachers are also suffering from their classes. They could barely teach the knowledge they do really want to share with their students. All the content in the first year is mainly about

how to pass the band 4 CET. And in the second year, students could think that the reason for learning a language but test subconsciously, naturally they would lose their passion. This is a double losing dilemma. So the CET could also become one of the main reasons for the decrease in passion.

3.2. Lack of language choices

Second foreign language learning is gradually accepted in Japan, which means that students could pick the language they would like to learn. But most Chinese students could only choose English as their major language lesson whether they want it or not. However, it is clear that the economic environment influences the choice of a second foreign language.[3] In addition, the trading partners of China in 2020 were Asian, EU, America, Japan, and South Korea, arranged from upper to lower. [7]The trend is proof that English might not be the first option for university students who might want to have further development in Europe or southeast Asia. Though Chinese students might want to learn other languages, they have to seek an institution outside of the university, which is a waste of time and money. And the resources of the university are not completely utilized. Besides, the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China has announced that the foreign language subject in the college entrance test 2022 could be English, Russian, Japanese, French, German, and Spanish.[9] However, most universities do not synchronize with the policies. Students who learned other languages but English could be refused by some majors such as military and foreign language.

3.3. CET is not an ideal way to estimate the English ability of students.

For the purpose of the three tests, CET mainly tests the grammar and principles of English, and IELTS mainly tests whether the candidates are capable to live in English countries, while TOFEL mainly examines the academic English ability of students. From the dictation of the three tests, the contents of TOFEL and IELTS are closer to reality and easier to be accepted, while the content of CET is largely adopted from reading passages, which makes it kind of illogical. From the speaking part of the three tests, CET does not put speaking as an obligated part, while IELTS and TOFEL consider it a must.[10] According to the analysis, CET could not examine the whole ability of students and especially their speaking ability. As a result, Chinese students commonly lack the ability to communicate with foreigners fluently. Besides, the most serious disadvantage of CET is that the logic of the examination is mainly based on Chinese native mindset. In other words, the CET tests the Chinese comprehension ability of English, rather than the ability of English. That is the

reason students can barely prove anything by passing the CET test.

4. REFORM SUGGESTION

4.1. The reform on compulsory language institution

Make the language lessons half compulsory, half elective. English course will be excluded from the compulsory course list, and will be reduced in proportion to the GPA of major course. But there would still be a requirement for students to choose a series of foreign language lessons to learn for at least 1 year, GPA of the language lessons this year would still be language GPA. And if they are willing to receive more language education, the duration could be prolonged to 3 years at most. And if students continue to learn a language after the first year, the GPA of those lessons would become elective GPA instead of language lessons GPA. Choice of languages should be decided by students themselves in the beginning few months of university life. After that, setting tiers for the language lessons is also necessary. English lessons should be divided into at least 3 tiers, arranged according to difficulty. To those students who only want to learn English for 1 year more or want to learn other languages, they could straightly choose the lowest level English language lesson or other zero basic language lesson. (assume that students only know things about Chinese and English) To those people who want to have some further English learning, there would be an exam to test whether they are capable to do it since they have learned the language since senior high school but their ability in English is different. After the test, they would be divided into the tier they belong to. Other languages lessons don't have the test is section because students are assumed to know nothing about those languages, so they have to start from the most basic part.

4.2. Enrich the choices of languages

Offering more choices of language that students would like to choose and enhance the coherence of the lessons. Students could combine their own career plans and optional language classes to choose the language they are willing to learn. And the improvement in coherence would assure that students could really absorb knowledge from the class rather than grab a few debris of the language. So that they would have the passion to learn the language. And we have to admit that not every school would have enough teachers and money, those universities could just handle the first reform and make attempts to cooperate with institutions to offer second foreign language learning if possible. Actually, some universities with enough funds have carried on the reform. For example, Zhejiang University has opened elective second foreign language lessons

which are highly coherent.[11] However, students of ZJU(Zhejiang University) still have to learn compulsory English lessons, and they could do not have enough stamina to learn other languages. So the first reform is the precondition of the second.

4.3. Make tests more rational

To those students who choose 2 or 3 years of language learning, the score of international tests such as JLPTJ (Japanese), IELTS, DSH (German), and DELE (Spanish), is necessary to prove that they come to know the language. And such a score proves more than the score of some Chinese native language tests, which only test the Chinese version foreign language. However, the dearth of seats and the expensive payment for the examination would become a huge concern. So reform on the national language tests by absorbing questions from those international language tests should be implemented. Ministry of Education of China could absorb the experience from Japan, by cooperating with the foreign institution, some Chinese version of IELTS and TOFEL could be presented as the TJC and TOEIC in Japan.[4]

4.4. Make a better language environment.

Environment plays a great part in language learning, but China doesn't have the cultural or historical background of other languages. Thus a foreign teacher is necessary for the lessons, who could help students to know the foreign mindset better. And native teachers should also use the foreign language to teach after the 1st year. Besides, there should be some regular and frequent communicating meetings between native and translate students, offline if possible.

5. CONCLUSION

It cannot be denied the existence of English compulsory institutions is reasonable in a way. Considering the trend of the economic situation of China and resources of universities, especially the cultivation of Chinese students' second language. Reforms are necessary. By comparing Japan and China, analyzed from demotivation, choices of languages, and the current test institution, four possible reforms are proposed in this paper. But those reforms may not be effective enough,

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