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# On Development History of Australia's Language Policy and the Enlightenment to China's Foreign Language Education\*

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**Abstract**—As is well-known, Australia is the first English country to officially make and efficiently carry out multi-lingual and plural culture in the world, whose language education policy has been highly spoken of by most linguists and politicians in the world in terms of the formulation and implementation. By studying such items as affecting factors, development history, implementing strategies of Australian language education policy under the background of multiculturalism, researchers can get a clue of the law of development of the language education policy in the developed countries and even the world. To be specific, through studying the development history of Australian language education policy under the background of multiculturalism, the paper puts forward some enlightenment and presents some advice on the China's foreign language education.

**Index Terms**—development history, language policy, enlightenment, China's foreign language education

## I. INTRODUCTION

Australia has a complicated population compared with other countries in the world, which is made up of the indigenous people, the immigrants and the settler group. In this case, Australia is a multilingual and multicultural country, with English being the official language. Meanwhile, many kinds of minority languages such as immigrant languages and aboriginal languages are coexisting. In order to coordinate different languages harmoniously, Australia officially issued *National Policy on Languages (NPL)* as the first authorized language policy of the country in 1987. The goals of NPL include the following three: the first, all Australians enjoy high standards of Australian English; the second, all Australians enjoy bilingualism; finally, all immigrant languages and aboriginal languages will be accepted as unique heritages of Australia which are irreplaceable and worthwhile of preservation. Australia's language policy under the background of multiculturalism is worth studying for the good of China's foreign language education.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Multiculturalism is the existence of multiple cultural traditions within a single nation, usually considered in terms of the culture associated with an aboriginal ethnic group and foreigner ethnic groups. Although multiculturalism was firstly presented in Canada, it gained rapid development in Australia as a governmental policy. Neil Bissoondath (2002) states that multiculturalism became an official national policy in 1971 so that the government could build up a harmonious coexistence of different groups. In Australia, multiculturalism policy was first raised up during Whitlam's Administration (1972-1975), and formally came into being during Fraser's Administration (1975-1983). During Hawke's administration, it became the national policy of Australia to deal with ethnic cultural diversity. Later on, it was continuously improved during Keating's Administration (1991-1996) and Howard's (1996-2008).

As a matter of fact, before the 1970s, Australia's language policy has been one important part of the nation's immigration policy, with language linking with ethnic relations, culture and immigration. For this reason, many scholars have taken great efforts to study different stages of Australian language policies like *White Australia Policy* and *Multicultural Policy*. Representative figures include Michael Clyne, Helen Moore and D. E. Ingram, as well as Joseph Lo Bianco, the author of *National Policy on Languages (NPL)*. Some of them adopt a documentary method by analyzing strategies for language policy planning, by providing goal-setting in specified language policy, and by studying specific language planning contexts on a historical basis. Some make comparisons between different policy texts, trying to find clues for better improvement. Others present an assessment of language policy documents, finding out the political implications and existing problems. The interaction between ethnicity and language policy has long been a hot topic in Australia in terms of language policy. In *The Politics of Language in Australia*, Uldis Ozolins (1993) studies the interplay between ethnicity, politics and language from the end of WWII to the beginning of 1990s in

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Australia. In *From Policy to Language Planning: An Overview of Language Other Than in Australia Education*, Djite (1994) analyzes languages other than English in Australia. And in *Australian Policy Activism in Language and Literacy*, Lo Bianco and Wickert (2001) presents introspection for language policy of Australia.

Domestic researches are relatively few and late. Professor Liu Rushan and Liu Jinxia (2003) divides the development history of Australian language policy into 3 stages: the first one is named as free period (1788-1900) in which English is the mainstream over other subordinating languages; the second one is assimilation period (1901-1970); and the third one is known as period of multiculturalism (1970-). Professor Wang Binhua (2003) specifically studies the bilingual education implemented in Australia Benowa State High School with a detailed record of process, results and assessment. Wang Hui (2010) presents a detailed analysis of the development history of Australia's language policy and further puts forward some advice for Chinese language education, in his *A Study on Language Policy in Australia*, the first domestic monograph about Australian language policy.

### III. DEVELOPMENT HISTORY OF AUSTRALIA'S LANGUAGE POLICIES

The Australian language policies have went through three distinct stages of evolution together with cultural policies. The following is the detailed description of the three stages.

The first stage is called assimilation (1901-1960s). During this period, the Australian government held that immigrants and indigenous people did harm to the national identity and security. And Australian government adopted assimilation policy towards other non-English languages, with an aim to force the indigenous people, the immigrants and the settler groups to give up their native languages and culture and to learn the language and culture of white Australian. *White Australia Policy* was prevailing at that time. Under this circumstance, non-English languages failed to enjoy respect and emphasis. In order to adapt themselves to the mainstream society of Australia, indigenous people and the immigrants had to learn English hard. And as a matter of fact, since 1901, English had been the only language used in Australian schools. Thus, in late 1900s, rich Chinese families sent their children back to China to study more Chinese culture before going back to Australia to study in schools run by white Australian. Assimilation policy had been carried out for so long a time that it caused negative effect on the development of Australian culture and language. What is worse is that social stability and unity between different groups of people had been undermined to a certain degree. Some kinds of languages used by indigenous people were gradually becoming extinct, so that in some places assimilation policy was strongly opposed by indigenous people. This kind of situation did obviously harm to the country's development. And in early 1970s, the multiculturalism was first introduced so that Australian government gradually realized that non-English languages and English must coexist and develop together.

The second stage is called "integration" (mid 1960s-1972). Since the beginning of 1960s, colonial and semi-colonial nations have become independent one after another. And there was a severe criticism from the world opinion, which made the *White Australia Policy* difficult to continue. Meanwhile, Australia had to give up the *White Australia Policy* for economic reasons. China had become Australia's main export trade partner since 1960s. But Chinese was still under discrimination by the *White Australia Policy*. Aiming to establish good rapport with China, Australia had to do something. Because of these reasons, the Australian government finally decided to abate the *White Australia Policy* in the early 1970s. And since the mid-1970s, there was an international change that equality and human rights had been greatly concerned. Language policies in Australia stressed the integration instead of the assimilation, advocating language diversity and cultural diversity rather than unity, respecting various values, and setting immigration policies of non-discrimination.

The third stage is called "multiculturalism" (1970-). The idea of multiculturalism was firstly introduced to Australia since the early 1970s. Since then, Australian people had gradually become aware of the vital importance of diverse culture and foreign languages. And the government began to adopt a lot of policies to encourage the study of foreign languages from 1970s to 1980s. Finally, in April 1987, the Commonwealth's Department of Education issued the first official language policy in Australia, *National Policy on Languages (NPL)* written by Prof. Joseph Lo Bianco. *NPL* includes the following 3 points: the first, all Australians have the equal right to enjoy high standards of Australian English; the second, all Australians have the equal right to enjoy bilingualism; the third, all immigrant languages and aboriginal languages will be accepted as unique heritages of Australia which are irreplaceable and worthwhile of preservation. From *NPL*, it can be seen clearly that Australia acknowledges English's status as their national language, stresses the bilingual education and protects the aboriginal language and culture at the same time. The central essence of *NPL* has perfectly solved the old problems, pointing out a correct direction for Australia's foreign language education to develop. As an epoch-making education achievement in Australia, *NPL* is beneficial for the nation to make the best use of language resources available, to strengthen the intellectual and cultural diversity, and to preserve languages of various ethnic groups.

### IV. CHARACTERISTICS OF AUSTRALIA'S LANGUAGE POLICY

In general, Australia has a lot for us to learn in terms of language policy making, for example, advocating multiculturalism, stressing language's economic value, focusing on education planning, emphasizing teachers' training and increasing education investment, etc. But the paper only analyzes characteristics of Australia's language policy

mainly in the following 4 aspects: education planning, curriculum design and implementation, teachers' training, as well as education investment.

#### 1. Education Planning:

First of all, the policy planning of foreign language education in Australia is obligatory, which means that Australia's foreign language education policy is issued as a national policy, publicized by the government education department to the whole country. In addition, the policy planning of foreign language in Australia is on a long-term basis, which means that it is designed so as to meet the demand of national economic development. For instance, because since the 1960s Australia had kept a much closer trade cooperation with Asia countries like China and Japan than with the American and European countries, Australia redesigned its foreign language education policy so as to create a larger export markets in Asia for economic interest. The new foreign language education policy specified that all middle-school students began being encouraged to learn history, culture and language of Asian countries especially China and Japan and that the government choose those who have talents in this field for special training, which is vital for the trade cooperation and diplomatic affairs.

What's more, Australian government attaches great importance to foreign language education by setting up special committees in charge of the management of the foreign education affairs, such as *Australian Language and Culture Committee*, *Australian Union and Asia Research Committee*. These committees are designed to have clear purpose respectively, being supposed to assist Australian government to make effective foreign language education policy so as to promote Australia's multi-development of foreign language education, which lays a solid foundation for Australia's success and reputation of policy-making of foreign language education in the world.

#### 2. Curriculum Design and Implementation:

Besides foreign language education policy planning, Australia also has some good experience worthwhile of learning for us in the aspect of curriculum design and implementation, which promotes the rapid development of its foreign language education. Australia's foreign language curriculum design is more advantageous over that of China. Being comparatively more flexible with more diverse content, Australia's foreign language courses are composed of selective courses and compulsory courses. Diverse and rich content of selective courses grant the students more autonomy so that they can arrange their learning in a flexible way based on their interest and ability. Such a flexible and effective curriculum design will certainly promote Australia's foreign language education. In addition, in Australia, the implementation of foreign language curriculum is also flexible and natural. To be more specific, Australia's foreign language education adopts proper curriculum, flexible teaching approaches, as well as free classroom atmosphere.

#### 3. Teachers' Training

Regarding the quality of the foreign language teachers as the key element for foreign language education quality, Australia attaches great significance to the development of foreign language teachers by making specific education policy for foreign language teachers, and providing a lot of opportunities for teachers' training. For example, in the beginning of 1990s, with a view to meeting the great challenges that face Australia's foreign language teacher training in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, Australian government adopted a specific project for training high-quality teachers of foreign language, by allocating 2 million Australian dollars as the funding of federal department of education to help teachers improve their professional development.

#### 4. Education Investment:

Australian government has long been emphasizing the education investment. Even in each state of Australia, there is a funding plan for foreign language education. Take the state of Victoria for instance, the education employment training department sets a funding plan of foreign language and Asian language to sustain Asian languages education and training in all schools. By enough funding, the schools can perfect the teaching conditions and buy enough teaching resources so that not only the teachers' professional development is dramatically promoted but also the efficiency of students' learning foreign language is greatly improved.

### V. ENLIGHTENMENT TO CHINA'S FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION

By analyzing the characteristics of Australia's foreign language education, we can get some clues that are beneficial to our Chinese foreign language education as follows.

First, Australia establishes specific committees to research the foreign language education, welcoming advice from people all walks of life. And that is why Australia gains success and reputation in its foreign language education in the world. But in contrast, China has never ever established any specialized committee or institution in charge of the management of the foreign language education, and in fact, China's foreign language education has been run by the Ministry of Education for so many years, only to make hasty decisions or issue inconsistent policies. Therefore, it is time that Chinese government established specialized and authorized foreign language education committees or institutions in charge of overall plan for all levels of foreign language education in China.

Second, in China, the foreign language curriculum, set by the Ministry of Education, is inflexible, which leaves no room for provinces, educators, schools and teachers to choose, while the foreign language curriculum in Australia is diversified so that the states, the schools and the teachers can make a choice about what policy to adopt, which textbook to use or what kind of content to teach. Thus, it's time that Chinese government made foreign language curriculum flexible and diverse, granted every province more rights to choose textbooks and design curriculums based on the

specific situations, granted schools more right to choose textbooks, and granted teachers more right to conduct activities in foreign language teaching. What's more, in China, the Ministry of Education has been aware of the significance of curriculum implementation and has issued certain policies trying to solve the problem in vain. But in contrast, Australia's foreign language curriculum implementation is effective and successful with free and active class atmosphere, which is good for foreign language education. Thus, we need absorb the good experience of how Australia's curriculum is carried out. And meanwhile, we need to be aware that the examination-oriented education is still prevailing in China, although the Ministry of Education has made great efforts to rectify it. Under the great pressure of different kinds of examinations, schools and teachers focus on students' examination grades instead of their language competence. In China's foreign language education, chances are that the teachers mechanically ask students to memorize a lot of vocabulary, grammatical points, and sentence patterns only to get high scores in exams, failing to provide them for opportunities to speak or listen to the foreign language. Therefore, it is high time that examination-oriented education was eliminated thoroughly and the implementation of the curriculum was conducted under strict monitor.

Finally, Chinese government does not allocate special fund for foreign language teachers to pursue advanced studies so that most foreign language teachers in China have little chance to improve their teaching skills by further studying teaching theory. But in contrast, Australian education department attaches great significance to teachers' training and constantly increases education investment in foreign language teaching so that the foreign language teachers in Australia improve their professional development a lot while foreign language teachers in China are poor in quality and educational background. Thus, it is high time that China's Ministry of Education set up a system of foreign language teachers training and increased education investment for our foreign language teachers to improve their professional development, which will definitely do good to China's foreign language education.

## VI. CONCLUSION

In sum, Australia does a good job in making and planning foreign language education policy so that its foreign language education has in turn promoted its social, economic and diplomatic development. And for China's foreign language education, Australia's advanced and effective experience is worth learning and imitating. Generally speaking, Chinese government needs to do the following to improve its foreign language education: first of all, reconsidering the foreign language education from a strategic height so as to maintain an overall planning; second, setting up ideas of multi-development in foreign language education so as to take a global view; third, considering the requirement and need of foreign language education with a view to developing our society, economy and international cooperation; fourth, making further scientific research in making foreign language policy while being open to any advice and opinions from all sectors of society; fifth, increase the status of minority languages other than English so as to develop more languages for trade use; sixth, develop our foreign language education in a reasonable and constant way so as to provide a healthy atmosphere for our foreign language education. And in the implementation of the foreign language policy, our government should first decide which language should be put in the first place in order to promote China's development better and faster, grant more rights to provinces and schools as well as teachers who teach foreign language, stress more on teachers' training, change from exam-oriented education to quality-oriented education so as to improve students' comprehensive competence in foreign language. Only with overall consideration and reasonable planning as well as more effective and constant policies can China improve its foreign language education.

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