

Original Paper

From Knowledge Transmission to Cultural Consciousness: The Paradigm Shift in Chinese Language Education Reform in Primary and Secondary Schools and Its Global Implications

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Abstract

This paper reviews the three-decade evolution of Chinese language teaching reform in primary and secondary schools, aiming to summarize Chinese experiences for global mother-tongue education. Drawing on core literature from the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI), the analysis reveals a paradigm shift from a knowledge-transmission model focused on instrumental literacy skills and grammar to a cultural-consciousness model emphasizing immersion, subjective construction, and holistic development. This shift manifests in three dimensions: teaching focus moving from teacher-centered to student-oriented and learning-before-teaching; teaching objectives evolving from mastery of the “Two Basics,” namely basic knowledge and basic skills, to integrated cultivation of core competencies including language, thinking, aesthetics, and culture; and cultural content expanding from literary classics to a dual emphasis on traditional essence and contemporary life. Recent reforms prioritize scientization and nationalization, building a modern Chinese language education system with Chinese characteristics while addressing “Internet+” challenges. Despite ongoing controversies, the trajectory points toward an ecosystem integrating national roots and modern vision. The findings offer theoretical and practical implications for mother-tongue education reforms in multicultural societies striving to balance linguistic skills, critical thinking, and cultural identity.

Keywords

Chinese language teaching reform, cultural consciousness, core competencies, student-oriented, paradigm shift, global implications

1. Introduction

As the core vehicle for cultivating mother-tongue proficiency, cultural transmission and shaping of national literacy, language education occupies a foundational position in education systems of countries around the world. Since the beginning of the 21st century, faced with numerous challenges of globalization, digitalization and social transformation, mother-tongue education systems worldwide have been exploring reform pathways to cultivate qualified citizens capable of meeting the complex demands of future society. In this global discourse, Chinese language education and its reform practices constitute a highly valuable case study due to their long historical depth, large-scale student population, and profound cultural heritage. Ren (2014) pointed out that language education involves not only the acquisition of the mother tongue and the transmission of national culture, but also the cultivation of national poetic sentiment, stirring of national emotion and inheritance of national spirit, all of which form the foundation for achieving national rejuvenation (p. 4). This statement transcends the narrow view of language education as a purely instrumental discipline, elevating it to the strategic height of national culture and spirit.

In the past few decades, Chinese language teaching reform has been a sustained and in-depth systematic project. It has undergone a transformation from micro-level adjustment of teaching methods to macro-level reconstruction of curriculum philosophies. In the early stage, the reform mainly focused on improving classroom teaching efficiency and consolidating basic knowledge (Meng, 1996; Tian, 1996). With the launch of the New Curriculum Reform, the scope of reform gradually extended to all fields including educational philosophy, teaching objectives, textbook content, the roles of teachers and students, and even the evaluation system (Wang, 2004; Ren, 2013). At the end of the 20th century, Ouyang, Su, and Tian (1998) envisioned language education for the 21st century. It was necessary for it to respond to the requirements of the times and foster students' comprehensive literacy. At present, the reform has entered a stage of in-depth exploration of excellent traditional Chinese culture (Cao, 2022) and teaching models under the "Internet+" background (Liang, 2021).

Although Chinese scholars have conducted abundant research on language teaching reform, the task of presenting these rich practical experiences and theoretical explorations on the international academic platform for global readers and researchers to review and learn from is far from sufficient. Many international education researchers may still view Chinese education through the stereotype of exam-oriented education, and have little knowledge of the innovative student-development-centered practices deeply rooted in cultural traditions that are thriving in Chinese education. Therefore, systematically introducing the essence of Chinese language teaching reform to the international academic community will not only help break cognitive barriers but also provide unique Chinese wisdom for global mother-tongue education.

For the present study, all articles are selected from core Chinese literature on language education reform in primary and secondary schools included in China's most authoritative database, the China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Through a systematic analysis of selected representative

core articles spanning three decades, this paper argues that the reform of Chinese language teaching in primary and secondary schools represents a fundamental paradigm shift from a knowledge-transmission paradigm to a cultural-consciousness paradigm. This paper first examines the theoretical connotation of this paradigm shift, and then specifically demonstrates the practical manifestations of this paradigm shift from three aspects: innovation of teaching practice (shift of focus), evolution of educational objectives (competency orientation) and expansion of cultural dimensions (integration of past and present). In addition, this paper reviews the main academic debates during the reform process. Finally, beyond the Chinese context, it explores the universal implications of this Chinese model for global mother-tongue education, especially on the essence of language education in the context of cultural diversity.

2. The Theoretical Core of the Paradigm Shift: From Knowledge Transmission to Cultural Consciousness

To thoroughly understand the logic of Chinese language teaching reform, one must grasp its inherent paradigm change. The “knowledge-transmission” paradigm usually regards language as an objective, decomposable system of knowledge (e.g., words, grammar, rhetorical devices) and a checklist of skills (e.g., reading, writing). The core teaching task under this paradigm is to deliver this knowledge and these skills to students as efficiently as possible. The teacher is the source of knowledge and the student is a passive recipient of knowledge. Wang (2004) pointed out: “Ability level and knowledge quantity may be positively correlated in the initial stage, but beyond a certain point, repeated knowledge accumulation does not necessarily lead to ability improvement” (p. 4). This view challenges the idea of improving students’ language ability solely through knowledge accumulation.

However, the “cultural-consciousness” paradigm is based on broader sociocultural theory and constructivist learning perspectives. It holds that language learning is essentially a process in which learners construct identity and understand the world by participating in meaning negotiation within a specific cultural-historical context. This concept is closely related to the idea of “cultural consciousness” proposed by Chinese sociologist Fei Xiaotong in 1997, which refers to the “self-awareness” of people living in a certain culture, including understanding the origins, formation process, distinctive features and development trend of that culture. This direction is further clarified by language teaching reform in the new era. It holds that modern language education must “adhere to nationalization as the foundation and scientization as the guide” to achieve the integration of “nationalization and scientization” (Zhou, 2020). Its core value lies in carrying forward the national spirit and transmitting human culture (Cao, 2022). At the same time, humanistic educational thought has also injected vitality into this paradigm, emphasizing the infiltration of humanistic spirit in all aspects of language teaching to cultivate students' sound personality (Gui, 2021).

In the field of language education, the meaning of “cultural consciousness” has three connotations: (1) Cultural Identity and Transmission. Students not only learn the form of language but also deeply

comprehend and identify with the excellent traditional culture of the Chinese nation through language, forming a profound sense of cultural belonging. As Wu and Cai (2007) stated, “The emergence of the 'traditional Chinese culture craze' is a reflection of society's renewed emphasis on and recognition of traditional culture. Contemporary Chinese people have strongly realized that revitalizing traditional culture is clearly necessary” (p. 106). (2) Critical Thinking and Innovative Consciousness. Cultural consciousness, of course, does not mean blind nostalgia for the past, but requires students to develop the ability to examine, analyze and innovate on the basis of understanding tradition, so that culture can radiate new vitality in contemporary society. It requires teaching to shift from knowledge-oriented to thinking-oriented, focusing on guiding students to conduct critical and in-depth thinking (Han, 2023). (3) Manifestation of Subjectivity. Students are regarded as cognitive subjects with independent personalities and great potential. The design of teaching activities aims to stimulate their internal motivation and inquisitive spirit, enabling them to transform from passive learners to active cultural participants and meaning creators. This is a fundamental change in the philosophy of Chinese language education, providing a theoretical basis for the subsequent series of specific reform measures.

3. Shift in Focus of Teaching Practice: From Teacher-Centered to Student-Oriented and Learning Before Teaching

The innovation of classroom teaching practice most directly reflects the paradigm shift. Traditional teaching models, cramming and teacher monologue, have gradually been replaced by teaching models that emphasize students' active participation and individual differences. For instance, the promotion of the Learning Before Teaching concept enables teachers to guide students to conduct self-directed learning before class using tools such as study guides, while classroom time focuses more on answering questions, collaborative inquiry and in-depth dialogue (Fang, 2014). It also restructures the temporal sequence of teaching and learning, embodies respect for students' subjectivity and cognitive rules, and turns the classroom from a knowledge transmission field into a thinking growth space. In recent reform explorations, Chinese language education increasingly emphasizes absorbing wisdom from classical educational thought. For instance, the insights of Locke's educational thought on thinking cultivation, teaching students in accordance with their aptitude, and home-school cooperation can provide concrete inspiration for teachers to implement student-oriented classroom practices (Han, 2023).

3.1 Establishment of Student Subjectivity and Teaching Based on Learning

The core of Chinese language teaching reform is to reposition the teacher-student relationship. Based on the Dual Intelligence Orientation Theory, Wang's (2013) research provides theoretical support for personalized teaching. She found that intelligence directionality affects the learning effectiveness of junior high school students; its manifestation varies across age groups and is more obvious in higher grades (p. 105). Therefore, teachers should abandon the one-size-fits-all approach and implement personalized teaching, holding an objective and fair attitude toward students with academic biases, learning difficulties or high achievement. This respect for and response to individual differences is a

vivid embodiment of the student-oriented concept. The demonstration and promotion of master teachers' demonstration lessons have become an important breakthrough to promote the transformation of teachers' thinking and innovate teaching methods. Teachers are required to shift from focusing on teaching methods to in-depth research on teaching content (Huang & Zhou, 2015).

3.2 The Structural Revolution of the Classroom: Learning First to Generate Questions, Teaching Based on Learning

Fang's (2014) teaching practice is a radical exploration in this direction. He solved the drawbacks of idealized preview and proposed a teaching model of “based in the classroom, learning first to generate questions, teaching based on students’ learning”. The core is to cancel pre-class preview, that is, students enter the classroom with zero prior knowledge, and conduct synchronous in-class pre-reading for all students (Fang, 2014, p. 49). In this design, every student can experience an authentic reading and thinking process directly observed and guided by the teacher, and generate their own questions based on this. Teachers' instruction is no longer a monologue based on a preset script, but precise guidance based on real-time feedback of students' learning, so that teachers' teaching has a solid student foundation, and teaching and learning achieve optimal synergy. The reading system he constructed -”self-study -generating questions -seeking solutions -generating new questions -re-study” (Fang, 2014, p. 49) - well illustrates the cyclical process of assimilation and accommodation in constructivist learning theory, and the classroom is a dynamic, generative inquiry community.

3.3 Expansion and Life-Contextualization of Teaching Space

The concept of student-oriented teaching is also reflected in the expansion of teaching space boundaries. In the reform of vocational high schools, He (2008) proposed that students could “go to the workplace to learn applied language” (p. 51). Hu (2010) noted that Li Yuanchang's reform explored “how to forge a path of educational and teaching reform with rural characteristics” (p. 47). Language learning was integrated into the practice of new rural construction. These practices break the boundaries of teaching space. Language learning is rooted in the real life of society, professions and other fields. Under the “Internet+” background, technology also expands teaching space, providing strong support for curriculum system construction, teaching activity design and immediate feedback. We need to reform and innovate the language teaching model to keep pace with the times (Liang, 2021). This is closely linked to the cultivation of language ability based on students' life experience and future development. It fully embodies the pragmatist educational philosophy of “education as life.” International experience, such as the American Project-Based Learning (PBL) method that emphasizes solving problems in real situations, also provides a reference for the life-contextualization and practicalization of language teaching in China (Cai, 2015).

4. The Evolution and Deepening of Educational Objectives: From the Two Basics to Core Competencies

The setting of teaching objectives directly reflects changes in educational value orientations. Chinese language teaching reform clearly shows a path of evolution from valuing the Two Basics (Basic Knowledge and Basic Skills) to valuing the integrated development of Core Competencies. Competency-oriented teaching objectives no longer merely aim at mastering static knowledge, but pay more attention to the cultivation of students' comprehensive qualities, such as the construction and application of language, the development and improvement of thinking, the appreciation and creation of aesthetics, as well as the transmission and understanding of culture (Ren, 2014). Zhang (2017) further pointed out that language core competencies are comprehensive qualities formed in language practice, integrating elements of language, thinking, aesthetics and culture, and the connotations of core competencies change with the development of the times. This deepening process means that language education is moving from instrumental training to the all-round development of individuals, striving to cultivate well-rounded people who adapt to future society.

4.1 *The Foundational Role and Historical Limitations of Two Basics Training*

Emphasizing the Two Basics was progressive in the early stage of reform. The Bamboo-Peeling Approach proposed by Meng (1996) requires students to refine vocabulary teaching as carefully as peeling bamboo, paying great attention to the exquisiteness of wording and sentence making. Its advantage is that it enables students to carefully savor texts, accumulate vocabulary, master vocabulary usage, and lay a solid foundation for basic language training (Meng, 1996, p. 46). Similarly, the Gain-Upon-Gain Approach emphasized a training system where “each lesson yields one gain, and gains are interconnected” (p. 46). These two approaches have played an undeniable role in consolidating students' language foundation. However, overemphasis on the Two Basics caused teaching to fall into the dilemma of fragmentation and technicism, ignoring the cultivation of students' comprehensive humanistic literacy. In other words, even though Chinese language classes take up the most teaching hours in primary and secondary schools, learning effects are often unsatisfactory because teaching objectives are often diluted or diversified, unable to focus on the correct use of language (Wang, 2017).

4.2 *The Full Establishment of Core Competencies Orientation*

Entering the new century, reform objectives have become increasingly comprehensive and in-depth. In terms of educational philosophy, there is a stronger sense of the times. That is to say, there is a growing emphasis on student-oriented teaching, attention to student differences, and promotion of students' balanced and personalized development, which is consistent with modern educational concepts. In terms of educational objectives, the focus has shifted to enhancing ability in knowledge teaching and integrating emotion, attitude, and values into knowledge acquisition and ability improvement, leading to significant changes in teaching practices (Ren, 2014, p. 4). This means that the goal of language education is no longer one-dimensional, but the integration of multi-dimensional core competencies.

Wang's (2004) reflection is consistent with this view. That is to say, language rules should be perceived and internalized through language phenomena. In other words, it is a learning method that integrates knowledge, ability and thinking process. At the same time, textbooks are the key carrier to achieve the objectives, so textbook compilation and reform involving teaching philosophy, objectives, content, methods, evaluation and other aspects constitute an important part of language education reform (Chen, 2024). How to implement core competencies through textbook compilation requires careful design. At the primary and junior high school levels, teachers can try to improve students' language proficiency through a content-theme approach, while at the high school level, they can explore a task-context design.

4.3 The Organic Integration of Emotion, Attitude and Values

This competency orientation especially stresses the organic integration rather than indoctrination of emotion, attitude and values. It means that language teaching cannot be just cold, technical skill training, but must become a process of arousing emotions, cultivating sentiments and shaping values. As Ren (2013) emphasized, language education is related to the cultivation of national poetic sentiment, the stirring of national emotion, and the inheritance of national spirit (p. 20). This elevates the language classroom beyond instrumentality and is the fundamental mission of the language classroom, namely, fostering virtue through education. From the perspective of curriculum nature, Wang (2017) emphasizes that the language curriculum is a humanities curriculum. Its fundamental task is to guide students to focus on linguistic form, appreciate language, activate humanistic qualities, and ultimately serve the fundamental goal of correctly using the national language.

5. Expansion of Cultural Dimensions and related debates: From Literary Classics to Traditional Culture and Contemporary Relevance

Under the cultural consciousness paradigm, the cultural dimension of language teaching has undergone unprecedented expansion and deepening, and also given rise to noteworthy debates. On the one hand, textbooks and teaching have incorporated contents such as classical poetry, prose, and folk culture to enhance students' cultural identity and inheritance (Wu & Cai, 2007). On the other hand, a practical difficulty is how to balance traditional culture with contemporary relevance, avoiding cultural teaching falling into the trap of antiquarianism or becoming superficial. Some views suggest that while paying attention to classics, the connection between language and contemporary society as well as students' lives should also be strengthened, so that cultural education has both historical depth and contemporary significance.

5.1 The Return of Traditional Culture in the Context of the Chinese Classics Craze

A noticeable trend is the strengthening of education on excellent traditional Chinese culture. Wu and Cai (2007) pointed out, "We should strengthen the comprehensive study of traditional culture in middle school language teaching, rather than the current emphasis on literary teaching" (p. 106). Such a view reflects the rising "Chinese classics craze" in language education at that time. Classics such as the

Three Character Classic, Analects, and Guwen Guanzhi are more systematically incorporated into textbooks and teaching, aiming to enhance students' national cultural self-awareness and cultivate cultural identity and pride. This constitutes an important resource for constructing cultural consciousness. On this basis, the new era reform further takes enhancing cultural confidence and rediscovering Chinese characteristics as core goals and firm beliefs (Zhou, 2020), and has entered a new stage of in-depth exploration of excellent traditional Chinese culture (Cao, 2022).

5.2 Culturally Adaptive Reform in Urban and Rural Contexts

The cultural dimension also faces reality. The rural Chinese language education reform discussed by Hu (2010) represents another cultural path, combining life culture and real-life practice. Rural language education can and should “forge a path of educational and teaching reform with rural characteristics” (Hu, 2010, p. 47), integrating language learning with local culture and agricultural production or new rural construction practices. This reform endows language education with local knowledge and practical life, which is also a creative expression of cultural consciousness in a specific social context.

5.3 Core Debates and the Path to Balance

The expansion of the cultural dimension is not without controversy. Two key issues arise: (1) the scope of traditional culture and its critical inheritance. Regarding the traditional classics craze, we still need to be cautious: it is necessary to avoid falling into the error of cultural conservatism or accepting everything uncritically. Wu and Cai (2007) clearly stated that “the study of traditional culture should be comprehensive rather than narrow; this principle also applies to our study of modern culture and foreign cultures” (p. 106). This reminds us that true cultural consciousness is open and dialectical, requiring dialogue with modernity and global civilization while promoting tradition. (2) Cultural Burden and Educational Effectiveness. Does the emphasis on cultural transmission increase students' academic burden, even occupying time for basic language skill training? Reflecting on the reform, Qin (2007) pointed out that, “while the intensity of curriculum and textbook reform is increasing, coordinated reform is also needed in some fields such as examination and evaluation methods (p. 144).” If the evaluation system still mainly focuses on knowledge memorization and standard answers, then in practice, in-depth cultural exploration and competency cultivation may be marginalized. It must be recognized that language education reform has always been a process of gradual progress based on inheritance (Yan, 2019). It requires pragmatic exploration to find out the shortcomings of contemporary language education and put forward constructive suggestions (Liu, 2018). The successful reform of the cultural dimension must seek a dynamic balance between tradition and modernity, national and global, cultural immersion and language foundation.

6. Dissenting Voices and Challenges Needing Confrontation in the Reform

Any profound reform in history is accompanied by discussions and debates. Chinese language teaching reform is not monolithic. Different scholars and practitioners have put forward reflections and warnings from different perspectives on Chinese language teaching. These reflections focus on the loss of

traditional essence and question the effectiveness of new models, forming a valuable tension that promotes the dialectical deepening of the reform (Wang, 2004). For example, the pursuit of teaching method modernization raises the issue of how to maintain the authenticity and depth of language teaching — a long-term concern in academic circles.

First, concerns about the formalization of reform. When many reform concepts are implemented at the grassroots level, they may become formalistic due to misunderstanding or constraints. For example, emphasizing student activities may degenerate into superficial enthusiasm; emphasizing inquiry-based learning may lack thinking depth. Lin (2004) emphasized that for teaching to keep pace with the times, we should focus on content rather than form. Educational reformers should always pay attention to the core of language education effectiveness (Wang, 2017).

Second, the lag in evaluation system reform. As pointed out by many scholars, this is also a bottleneck. Qin (2007) listed examination and evaluation methods as areas that need further reform (p. 145). If high-stakes examinations such as Gaokao (National College Entrance Examination) and Zhongkao (Senior High School Entrance Examination) do not make corresponding reforms in content and form and still dominate the direction of teaching, many classroom-level innovations cannot be deepened and sustained.

Third, the challenge of teacher professional development. The paradigm shift puts extremely high requirements on teachers. They must transform from knowledge transmitters to learning facilitators and cultural communicators. This transformation requires them to have broader knowledge and more exquisite teaching skills. In addition, they need stronger curriculum development and reflective abilities. As early as more than 20 years ago, Song (1998) proposed that Chinese majors in normal universities should face the challenges of middle school reform and innovate teacher training models. Whether teachers are prepared and receive continuous support is the key to the success of the reform. In the new era, the requirements in this regard are even higher. Therefore, it is necessary to vigorously revitalize language teacher education and promote teachers' professional development (Cao, 2022). The improvement of teacher quality should be regarded as the decisive factor in the reform (Zhou, 2020).

These dissenting voices and challenges do not negate the reform but guide it towards a clearer, more stable and sound path. They point out the direction for future reform efforts. Confronting these challenges and solving them systematically, building a synergistic ecosystem where philosophy, practice, evaluation, and teacher development advance together, is the key for language teaching reform to transcend debates and achieve substantive breakthroughs (Ren, 2013). Reform requires strengthened unified leadership as a fundamental guarantee (Zhou, 2020) and must always adhere to the path of pragmatic exploration (Liu, 2018). Reformers should have a high degree of practical wisdom to find a dynamic balance between inheritance and innovation, ideal and reality.

7. Conclusion

The reform of Chinese language teaching in primary and secondary schools over the past thirty-plus years is a comprehensive and profound paradigm change from educational philosophy to classroom practice. Guided by the value of cultural consciousness, it systematically constructs a new ecology of language education to respond to contemporary problems and show national characteristics by establishing a student-oriented teaching subject view, cultivating an integrated concept of core competencies, and broadening a cultural perspective that integrates past and present with the present as the focus. Fang's (2014) "Learning First to Generate Questions" model, Wang's (2013) exploration of personalized teaching, and discussions on the "Chinese Classics Craze" and rural education characteristics all enrich the practical scenarios of this transformation. Recent research and practice show that this transformation is still deepening in the new era, emphasizing the integration of nationalization and scientization (Zhou, 2020), absorbing wisdom from classics and history (Han, 2023). and actively exploring integration with Internet technology (Liang, 2021). At the same time, reform has always progressed gradually in the tension between inheritance and innovation, ideal and effectiveness (Yan, 2019; Liu, 2018).

This Chinese experience has valuable implications for global mother-tongue education. First, it shows how mother-tongue education can transcend instrumental rationality and become an important way to cultivate cultural identity and national cohesion. In the wave of globalization, Chinese practice provides a value answer to how to maintain cultural diversity and nourish the cultural roots of young people. Second, China's exploration of balancing student-centeredness with teacher guidance, knowledge foundation with comprehensive competencies, and traditional culture with modern spirit provides a dialectical approach for other countries facing such tensions in mother-tongue education. Third, China's promotion of educational change through large-scale national reform projects, as well as the experiences and lessons in the process, have special research value for education systems facing challenges of similar scale and complexity. Among them, the definition and implementation paths of language core competencies (Zhang, 2017), the emphasis on humanistic spirit (Gui, 2021), and the integration of international methods such as project-based learning (Cai, 2015) are all specific topics for global dialogue.

While the reform is still ongoing, future research needs to combine in-depth field investigations and international comparisons to more accurately extract the transferable elements of the Chinese model. In the future, the reform of the evaluation system, the support of teacher development, and the deep integration of digital technology will constitute important research trends in Chinese language teaching reform. It is believed that integrating the wisdom of Chinese language teaching reform into the global education landscape will not only promote international academic exchanges but also provide a Chinese solution for the common educational cause of humanity.

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