10

Multilingual Talent Development in Chinese Universities under the Belt and Road Initiative: Educational Planning and Curriculum Transformation

Bei Lu Vichaya Lipipun and Chatwarun Angasinha



Multilingual Talent Development in Chinese Universities under the Belt and Road Initiative: Educational Planning and Curriculum Transformation

Bei Lu[1] Vichaya Lipipun[2] and Chatwarun Angasinha[3]

[1]College of Leadership and Social Innovation, Rangsit University, Pathum Thani 12000, Thailand
e-mail : 897956753@qq.com

[2]College of Leadership and Social Innovation, Rangsit University, Pathum Thani 12000, Thailand
e-mail : tai.vlipipun@gmail.com

[3]College of Leadership and Social Innovation, Rangsit University, Pathum Thani 12000, Thailand
e-mail : chattrsu@gmail.com

Received : March 15, 2026 Revised : June 4, 2026 Accepted : June 11, 2026

Abstract

This study aims to examine the current situation of foreign language education planning in Chinese universities within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative and to propose strategies for improving multilingual talent development. The research employed a qualitative approach through document analysis and in-depth interviews with policymakers, foreign language instructors, students, and enterprise representatives. A total of 4 policymakers, 4 foreign language instructors, 5 students, and 3 enterprise representatives were selected using purposive sampling, covering five language areas including English, Russian, Korean, Thai, and Arabic (see Research Methodology section for details). The findings indicated that foreign language education planning in many universities still focused primarily on English, while the development of non-common languages remained limited. In addition, the shortage of qualified teachers and the weak connection between curriculum design and industrial needs reduced the effectiveness of language education. The evaluation system also emphasized theoretical knowledge rather than practical intercultural communication skills. In response to the above problems, this study set three interrelated research objectives. The study suggests strengthening

multilingual education policies, promoting interdisciplinary curricula combining language and professional knowledge, and enhancing cooperation between universities and industries. These strategies can support the cultivation of multilingual and intercultural talents required for international cooperation under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Keywords : Belt and Road Initiative; Foreign Language Education; Multilingual Education; Intercultural Competence; Curriculum Reform

Introduction

The Belt and Road Initiative, proposed in 2013, encompasses five key pillars including policy coordination and people-to-people bonds (Chen, 2020, p.19). Within this framework, language has emerged as a vital strategic resource for international cooperation. The initiative spans 65 countries and regions with 53 official languages (Gu & Chen, 2017, p.64), profoundly impacting China's traditionally English-centered foreign language education system. However, China's foreign language education planning faces significant challenges: the talent pool remains homogeneous with a shortage of versatile international talents (Fan & Dang, 2023, p.43); there is no national-level macro-planning or dedicated language planning agency (Huang, 2022, p.156); and despite nearly 3,000 foreign language majors offered, non-mainstream language and multidisciplinary professionals remain critically scarce due to inadequate planning (Jiang & Yang, 2020, p.1). Meanwhile, enterprises increasingly demand multilingual capabilities, particularly composite talents proficient in non-mainstream languages relevant to Belt and Road countries (Zheng et al., 2020, p.97). Against this backdrop, this study examines the current state, challenges, and optimization pathways for foreign language education planning in Chinese universities under the Belt and Road Initiative.

Literature Review

Since the "Belt and Road" initiative was proposed, foreign language education, as an important part of supporting the country's opening-up strategy, has received extensive attention in the research of language policy, talent cultivation, and curriculum system. In this study, the researchers will systematically sort out

the relevant research results from four aspects: (1) the theory of language education planning, (2) foreign language education policy under the "Belt and Road" Initiative, (3) foreign language education planning research, and (4) foreign language education planning research under the "Belt and Road" Initiative, in order to provide theoretical support and identify key entry points for investigation.

Theory of Language Education Planning

Language education planning is an important part of language planning, which mainly studies the language planning problems in education, including not only the planning work of language education in the traditional sense, but also the language planning problems in education, such as the teaching language planning of the school curriculum, the language planning of the teaching materials, and the language environment (Shen & Xia, 2018, p.38). Cooper (1989) points out that language planning must pay attention to the planning of human language acquisition and educational activities, of which language education is a core goal that cannot be ignored. Kaplan & Baldauf constructed a systematic framework for language education planning, proposing that language education involves key components such as acquisition planning, curriculum development, teaching materials and methodology, teacher training, resource allocation, and evaluation mechanisms (Kaplan & Baldauf, 2003, p.202). The model emphasizes the dual goals of education policy, for example, setting standards through policy and meeting diverse language needs through cultivation, reflecting the structural and systematic nature of language education planning (Shen, 2017, p.11).

Foreign Language Education Policy under the "Belt and Road" Initiative

Since its inception, the "Belt and Road" initiative, as an important strategy for China's opening up and international cooperation, has had as one of its core objectives to enhance cooperation and exchange between China and the countries along the route at many levels, including the economy, culture, and education. Language, as the foundation of cultural exchange, is particularly important in the Belt and Road Initiative. For this reason, the Chinese government has repeatedly emphasized the importance of language education in its policy documents, and has put forward a series of policies and measures for foreign language education to

support the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative. For example, *Vision and Action for Promoting the Construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road (National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, & Ministry of Commerce, 2015)* emphasizes that language interoperability and multilingual education are the basis for cultural exchanges; *Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative in Education (Ministry of Education, 2016)* make it clear that colleges and universities should increase the number of courses in *non-common languages* and carry out international cooperation; *Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on comprehensively strengthening the work of spoken and written Chinese for a new era (General Office of the State Council, 2020)* strengthens the role of language policy in supporting national strategies from a macro perspective. All these policies point out the fundamental role of language education in serving the construction of "Belt and Road".

Research Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach aimed at achieving three objectives: first, to investigate the current situation of foreign language education planning in Chinese universities within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative; second, to identify the major problems and constraints confronting multilingual talent development; and third, to propose corresponding optimization pathways and improvement strategies. The research design primarily consisted of two components: document analysis and semi-structured interviews.

Research Scope and Sample

First, through document analysis, the study systematically reviewed existing research findings on language education planning, public policy implementation, and foreign language education policies under the Belt and Road Initiative from both domestic and international sources, thereby constructing the theoretical foundation and analytical framework for this research. Second, the study selected four representative applied undergraduate institutions in Jiangsu Province as case studies. A total of 16 participants were recruited using purposive sampling to conduct in-depth interviews. The participant distribution included: 4 policymakers

(college leaders and academic affairs administrators), 4 foreign language instructors covering English, Russian, Korean, Thai, and Arabic, 5 students (including both Chinese students and international students studying in China), and 3 enterprise representatives (marketing or human resources managers) engaged in Belt and Road projects. All interviews were one-on-one in-depth interviews. This study is part of a doctoral dissertation project conducted from September 2024 to January 2025.

Data Collection

Data sources included document analysis and semi-structured interviews. Documents reviewed included national and provincial policy documents and university curriculum plans. Semi-structured interviews lasting 45 to 75 minutes each were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim, yielding approximately 280,000 Chinese characters of text. Interview topics covered foreign language program offerings, curriculum systems, faculty resources, intercultural competence cultivation, and enterprise demands for multilingual talents.

The language provision data presented in Figure 1 were compiled by the author from publicly available sources. The primary source was the Ministry of Education's official online portal for undergraduate program registration and approval records (http://www.moe.gov.cn), supplemented by the official admission and academic program websites of 168 higher education institutions in Jiangsu Province. A systematic search was conducted between September and October 2024 to identify which universities offered each foreign language as an approved undergraduate major. Only degree-granting majors formally registered with the Ministry of Education were counted; non-degree certificate programs, minor specializations, and elective language courses were excluded.

The teacher distribution data presented in Figure 2 were compiled by the author from institutional administrative records. During the on-site interview visits to the four participating universities between September 2024 and January 2025, the researcher obtained official faculty staffing statistics from the Office of Academic Affairs and/or the Department of Foreign Languages of each institution. These records provided the total number of full-time foreign language instructors

categorized by language specialization. Only full-time faculty members whose primary teaching assignment was in a foreign language program were counted; part-time instructors and guest lecturers were excluded from the statistics.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke (2006) was conducted through six phases: familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Two researchers independently coded 20 percent of the sample, achieving an inter-coder reliability Kappa coefficient of 0.84. The remaining coding was completed through consensus.

Trustworthiness

Credibility was ensured through triangulation, which included multiple data sources and participant types, and member checking, which involved respondent validation of preliminary findings. Thick description of case contexts supported transferability. A complete audit trail of the research process ensured dependability.

Research Ethics

All participants provided informed consent. Pseudonyms and codes such as Policy Maker A and Instructor C are used throughout the manuscript to protect anonymity.

Results of the Research

The Current Situation of Foreign Language Education Planning Through thematic analysis of policy documents and in-depth interview data collected from policymakers, instructors, students, and enterprise representatives across four universities, this study reveals the structural contradictions and practical challenges confronting foreign language education planning in Chinese applied undergraduate institutions within the context of the Belt and Road Initiative.

The study reveals a structural imbalance in current university language provision, with non-common languages facing systemic developmental difficulties. As shown in Figure 1, among 168 universities in Jiangsu Province, 36 offer English

programs, while only one each offers Thai and Arabic, with Russian and Korean offered by only eight and three institutions respectively.

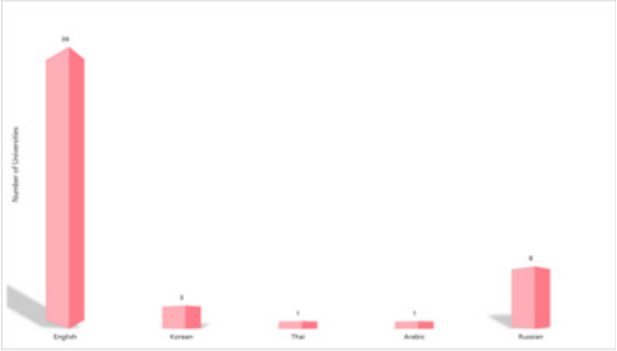


Figure 1: Number of Universities Offering Various Languages in Jiangsu Province

Source. Compiled by the author based on data retrieved from the Ministry of Education's official online portal for undergraduate program registration and approval records (http://www.moe.gov.cn), cross-checked with the publicly accessible admission and academic program websites of 168 higher education institutions in Jiangsu Province. Data were accessed and verified between September and October 2024. The count includes only institutions offering the respective language as an officially approved undergraduate major; minor programs and elective courses were not counted.

One policymaker candidly stated, "Our university's enrollment plan essentially revolves around English, because English is the language in greatest demand in the market" (Policy Maker C, 2024). This path dependency means that even when non-commonly taught language programs are established under national policy guidance, they remain marginalized in resource allocation and faculty configuration. These programs generally suffer from limited scale, weak faculty, and developmental difficulties. A Thai instructor noted that as a newly established major, Thai faced "great difficulties in faculty recruitment," particularly in finding "high-level Thai teachers capable of both teaching and research" (Instructor D, 2024). This starkly illustrates the acute contradiction between high market demand for non-commonly taught language talents and insufficient educational supply

The research further indicates that language program offerings have failed to align with regional industrial characteristics. As one policymaker reflected, "Our current curriculum follows the traditional framework and lacks clear understanding of market changes brought by the Belt and Road Initiative" (Policy Maker A, 2024). This static planning model has created a structural mismatch between language supply and regional economic development needs.

Major Problems Confronting Multilingual Talent Development

The study finds that current foreign language curriculum systems exhibit homogeneity, with a substantive lack of interdisciplinary integration. Curricula remain heavily focused on foundational language skill training, where practical knowledge essential for Belt and Road cooperation is significantly insufficiently integrated, such as international trade, engineering management, and cross-cultural business communication. An English instructor pointed out, "Our current courses mainly focus on language skill training, with very few interdisciplinary courses in areas like international relations and cross-cultural communication" (Instructor C, 2024). This "language-for-language's-sake" model results in students possessing narrow knowledge structures, hindering their ability to effectively apply language skills within specific professional contexts. Course content generally lacks in-depth exploration of target countries' national conditions, business practices, and cultural norms. A Thai language student reported, "We mainly learn grammar and translation skills in class. During my internship, I realized that even with language proficiency, communication barriers existed because I didn't understand Thai clients' business culture" (Student C, 2024). This superficial cultural understanding directly compromises students' future adaptability and effectiveness in cross-cultural work settings.

The study identifies structural shortcomings in faculty development, with a general deficiency in cross-cultural teaching capacity among instructors. University foreign language faculties exhibit a structural pattern of "English dominance" over other languages. As illustrated in Figure 2, the number of English instructors in surveyed universities far exceeds the total number of instructors for all other languages combined.

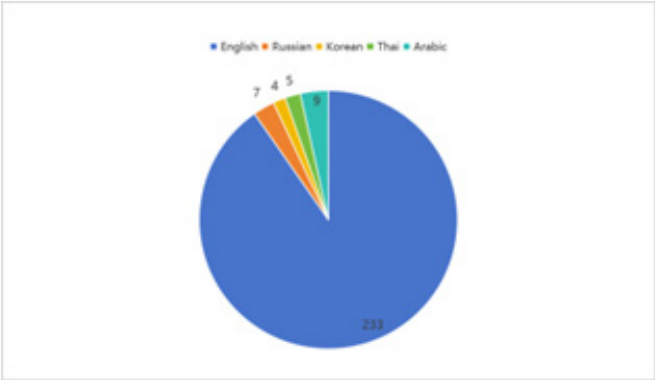


Figure 2: Distribution Ratio of Foreign Language Teachers in Four Universities in Jiangsu Province

Source. Compiled by the author from faculty staffing records and administrative statistics obtained from the Office of Academic Affairs and/or the Department of Foreign Languages at the four participating universities during the interview visits in 2024–2025.

A policymaker commented on recruiting Arabic instructors: "The recruitment threshold is high, but subsequent compensation and career development prospects fail to reflect their scarcity, discouraging many outstanding talents from coming" (Policy Maker A, 2024). This structural imbalance prevents non-commonly taught language programs from forming stable teaching teams. While most instructors possess solid language proficiency, they lack industry experience and cross-cultural teaching competence. An international instructor observed, "In my country, foreign language majors usually have company internships. Here, classroom teaching still seems based on lectures with fewer interactive sessions" (Instructor D, 2024). Systematic training opportunities for non-commonly taught language instructors and cross-cultural teaching capacity are scarce, with existing training resources predominantly focused on updating English teaching methodologies, failing to adequately support instructors' professional development needs.

The study reveals obsolescence in teaching methods and materials, which are severely detached from practical application. Traditional lecture-based methods still dominate classrooms with limited student participation in practice. An international student from Russia observed, "Here, classroom teaching seems based on lectures with fewer interactive sessions. In my country, we use role

-playing and situational simulations to improve language application skills" (Student E, 2024). Textbook content updates slowly with narrow application scenarios. Existing textbooks exhibit a tendency to prioritize Euro-American contexts over Belt and Road regions. A Russian language student noted, "Textbooks cover much Russian culture but very little about Central Asian countries' language needs and cultural backgrounds. When faced with related tasks, we feel completely at a loss" (Student B, 2024). This "cultural bias" in textbooks limits students' understanding of diverse cultures and their ability to apply language effectively in specific contexts.

The study finds that assessment systems are unidimensional, with an institutional absence of industry-education feedback mechanisms. Student evaluation relies predominantly on summative written examinations focusing on declarative knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary, lacking effective tools for assessing higher-order competencies including practical language application and cross-cultural communication skills. A policymaker admitted, "Exam content mainly consists of vocabulary, grammar, and short essay writing, with almost nothing involving language application in actual communication or cross-cultural scenarios" (Policy Maker B, 2024). This assessment orientation reinforces test-oriented learning approaches, inhibiting the development of students' comprehensive abilities. Stable feedback mechanisms for talent cultivation quality have yet to be established between universities and enterprises. An HR manager stated, "We have many specific suggestions for improving graduate performance, but we rarely have the opportunity to communicate them to universities. This lack of communication severely impacts talent training quality" (Employee B, 2024). This broken feedback loop renders university talent cultivation a relatively closed system, unable to dynamically align with external demands, ultimately resulting in the structural mismatch between educational supply and market demand.

Conclusion

This study reveals the systemic challenges confronting foreign language education planning in Chinese universities under the Belt and Road Initiative: structural imbalance in language provision, homogeneity of curriculum systems,

deficiencies in faculty capacity, obsolescence of pedagogical methods, and rigidity of evaluation mechanisms. These problems reflect the fundamental disjunction between the traditional "disciplinary paradigm" centered on language and literature and the emerging "competence paradigm" demanding language as a tool for professional application. This finding corroborates Shen's (2017) argument regarding the necessity of state intervention in language planning and aligns with Qiao's (2023) emphasis that, given the deepening trade cooperation between China and BRI-partner countries, small-language talents are increasingly required to master multiple foreign languages or possess relevant professional knowledge to accommodate frequent cross-border exchanges and linguistic integration.

Based on these findings, three levels of recommendations are proposed. At the macro policy level, national and provincial authorities should formulate key language development plans with special funds and policy preferences, establishing dynamic adjustment mechanisms to optimize language structures according to market demands. At the meso coordination level, governments should incentivize industry-education integration platforms and establish regular university-enterprise feedback mechanisms to incorporate industry standards into curriculum design. At the micro pedagogical level, universities should develop "language + X" interdisciplinary curricula integrating language training with professional knowledge in international trade, engineering management, and law. Efforts to recruit and cultivate non-commonly taught language faculty should be intensified, with teachers dispatched for overseas study or enterprise practice. Interactive teaching methods such as case teaching and project-based learning should be introduced, utilizing modern technologies to create authentic language environments. Traditional evaluation approaches should be reformed to establish diversified assessment systems emphasizing practical application abilities, with graduate tracking mechanisms forming virtuous cycles of evaluation, feedback, and improvement.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study is limited to four applied undergraduate institutions in Jiangsu Province; thus, the findings may not be directly transferable to other regions or university types. Second, as a

qualitative study, the results are not intended for statistical generalization. Third, social desirability bias may have influenced some participant responses despite assurances of anonymity. Future research may expand institutional and geographical scope, strengthen cross-national comparative studies, and explore technological transformations such as artificial intelligence in foreign language education.

References

Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, *3*(2), 77-101. https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa

Chen, M. (2020). *Research on foreign language planning for the Belt and Road Initiative*. Foreign

Cooper, R. L. (1989). *Language planning and social change. Cambridge University Press.Language Teaching and Research Press*. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511620812

Fan, C., & Dang, Z. (2023). International talent cultivation and reform of college foreign language education under the background of the Belt and Road Initiative. *China Higher Education*, (20), 42-45.

General Office of the State Council. (2020). *Opinions of the General Office of the State Council on comprehensively strengthening the work of spoken and written Chinese for a new era (No. 30 [2020] of the General Office of the State Council). Gazette of the State Council of the People's Republic of China*. https://www.gov.cn/gongbao/content/2021/content_5661979.htm

Gu, X., & Chen, C. (2017). Strategies for foreign language education in higher vocational colleges under the background of the Belt and Road Initiative. *Chinese Vocational and Technical Education*, (1), 64–69.

Huang, C. X. (2022). An analysis of the mechanism for cultivating multilingual talents through collaborative efforts of government, enterprises, and universities. *Social Sciences in Guangxi*, (9), 155–160.

Jiang, H., & Yang, A. (2020). The Belt and Road Initiative and reform in China's foreign language education. *Foreign Language Teaching*, *41*(1),1-2. https://doi.org/10.16362/j.cnki.cn61-1023/h.2020.01.001.

Kaplan, R. B., & Baldauf, R. B., Jr. (2003). *Language and language-in-education planning in the Pacific Basin*. Kluwer Academic Publishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-0145-7

Ministry of Education. (2016). *Promoting the Belt and Road Initiative in education* (Document No. Jiaowai [2016] 46). http://www.moe.gov.cn/srcsite/A20/s7068/201608/t20160811_274679.html

National Development and Reform Commission, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, & Ministry of Commerce. (2015). *Vision and action for promoting the construction of the Silk Road Economic Belt and the 21st Century Maritime Silk Road*. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/web/zyxw/201503/t20150328_332173.shtml

Qiao, J., Wang, L. L., & Wang, H. (2023). An analysis of China's demand for language talents in countries along the Belt and Road. *Foreign Language Research*, *40*(4), 105-111. https://doi.org/10.13978/j.cnki.wyyj.2023.04.012

Shen, Q. (2017). China's foreign language education planning: Directions and agendas. *Foreign Languages in China*, *14*(5), 11–20. https://doi.org/10.13564/j.cnki.issn.16729382.2017.05.003.

Shen, Q., & Xia, T. (2018). Basic issues in language strategic planning for the Belt and Road Initiative. *Journal of Xinjiang Normal University (Philosophy and Social Sciences Edition)*, *39*(1), 36-43. https://doi.org/10.14100/j.cnki.65-1039/g4.2018.01.003.

Zheng, Y., Lu, Y., & Liang, W. (2020). Research on college foreign language education planning based on demand analysis under the background of the Belt and Road Initiative. *Overseas English*, (19), 95–96, 98.