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Inspiration from Singapore Bilingual Education

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Abstract. This article explores the bilingual education policies of Singapore and China, with a focus on analyzing the similarities and differences in their formulation and implementation processes, and examines the unique backgrounds, goals, and practices of the two countries. By reviewing the innovative achievements and successful experiences of bilingual education in Singapore, this study assesses how these successful practices can provide valuable references for the reform of the bilingual education system in China. The bilingual education model in Singapore emphasizes the dual-track approach of "English + mother tongue", with English serving as the primary language for communication, while also preserving the mother tongue (Chinese, Malay or Tamil) to carry on the culture. Bilingual education in Singapore begins in kindergarten and runs throughout the entire education system. Innovative teaching methods and technological means are employed to enhance learning efficiency. This model not only nurtures global talents with bilingual skills, but also promotes the coexistence of diverse cultures. The Singapore experience offers significant insights for China in improving its bilingual education policies, particularly in balancing individualized teaching and cultural inheritance.

Keywords: Bilingual education, Singaporean education, comparative education, implementation

1. Introduction

Since the 1960s, Singapore has regarded bilingual education as the cornerstone of its language policy, and national leaders have continuously emphasized its importance since 1959 [1]. This policy, known as "English plus one designated official language", aims to equip students with global competitiveness through bilingual education in English (the official language) and their native language, while maintaining cultural and linguistic diversity [1]. Studies have shown that language and reading/writing exposure in both family and school environments significantly facilitate bilingual acquisition and social-emotional development among Singaporean children [2]. The core teaching methods include code conversion and shared reading. These cost-effective teaching approaches can promote the harmonious development of children's bilingual abilities [2]. Research has confirmed that the cultivation of language structure awareness is of great significance for improving the reading comprehension abilities of both monolingual and bilingual children. The bilingual children in Singapore demonstrate outstanding reading comprehension skills, particularly in phonological awareness, morphological awareness and syntactic awareness, which is believed to stem from their exposure to the bilingual environment [3]. The analysis of data from 805 bilingual preschool children in Singapore showed that evaluating the bilingual environment and vocabulary acquisition through

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parent questionnaires and standardized vocabulary tests is crucial for understanding the bilingual experience [4].

The bilingual education system in Singapore not only enhances students' language skills, but also plays a significant role in preserving cultural identity and social values. The prime minister's initiative has led to the emergence of new measures, including "Less Teaching, More Learning" (TLLM), which aims to enhance the openness and flexibility of teaching, while focusing on students' understanding and engagement [5]. The implementation of bilingual education policies in Singapore not only offers students more opportunities for career and academic development but also significantly promotes the country's economic and social development. Therefore, studying the characteristics, implementation paths and effectiveness of language education policies in Singapore can provide valuable references for countries with multilingual and multicultural backgrounds such as China, helping them better cope with language and cultural challenges in the process of globalization.

2. Bilingual education in Singapore

The bilingual education policy in Singapore is renowned for its diversity and complexity, which is reflected in its historical background, cultural orientation, implementation methods, and educational reforms. Since 1959, this policy has gone through several critical stages: initially, through comprehensive schools and mandatory second language learning, the goal was to achieve a balance between English and the native language [1]. Due to the dominant position of English in the fields of business, government, schools and media, the usage rate of the native language at home has declined, posing challenges to policy implementation [2]. After the release of the 1979 report, policy adjustments emphasized the importance of educational diversification and implemented differentiated bilingual education for students of different abilities [1]. The bilingual education reform in Singapore has gone through four stages, evolving from the initial Ten-Year Education Development Plan to the current comprehensive bilingual education policy [4].

2.1. Singapore's language policy

Multiple studies have shown that the vocabulary of bilingual children (especially receptive vocabulary) is closely related to their social and emotional abilities. Children's language skills help them better understand and respond to information in social situations, reducing behavioral problems. In the preschool education environment of Singapore, children with a higher receptive vocabulary show fewer social emotional and behavioral issues. Specifically, the increase in the receptive vocabulary of English significantly reduced behavioral problems and improved prosocial behavior. Sun et al. further emphasized the social and emotional advantages of bilingual children, stating that "children with larger receptive vocabulary perform better in socio-emotional and behavioral skills" [4], shows the improvement of language ability helps children better adapt to different social situations. Besides vocabulary, bilingual output ability is also a key factor influencing children's social and emotional development.

The Harmonious Bilingual Development (HBD) theory, as an emerging concept in multilingual environments for bilingual learning, aims to achieve a balance among children's subjective well-being, language skills, and social emotional development. The concept was first proposed by De However in 2006, and it was pointed out that it applies to families that have not encountered the bilingual environment dilemma or have had a positive bilingual experience [2]. The HBD approach emphasizes the promotion of children's overall language development and subjective well-being in a bilingual environment, especially in families with exposure to multiple languages.

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Bilingualism not only involves language proficiency, but also encompasses children's social and emotional qualities as well as their ability to cope with the diverse cultural challenges in the real world. In countries like Singapore that implement bilingual education systems, the concept of harmonious bilingualism holds significant practical importance. The bilingual environment not only affects children's language acquisition but also profoundly shapes their social and emotional development. By promoting balanced learning of English and the native language, HBD can facilitate the all-round development of children, enabling them to gain cognitive advantages and social-emotional support in a multilingual environment. The research emphasizes that bilingual exposure is positively correlated with children's language abilities, indicating that an increase in language exposure within the family will enhance the vocabulary of the target language for children.

In Singapore, where English is the primary language of communication, native language acquisition is of vital importance for children's bilingual development. Studies have shown that exposure to the mother tongue can enhance children's social and emotional abilities through family interactions and media consumption. Research has confirmed that children who frequently engage with two languages and use both languages equally demonstrate stronger social skills, which stems from the improvement of their communication skills and ability to build interpersonal relationships. Second language acquisition not only enhances language skills but also promotes the social and emotional development of children. Research has shown that it can enhance prosocial behaviors and reduce behavioral problems.

2.2. Implementation strategie

The implementation strategies of bilingual education in Singapore have multi-dimensional characteristics. In 1960, the Singaporean government implemented a mandatory second language education policy, requiring all primary schools to teach a second language to ensure that students receive a balanced education between English and their native language [2]. The establishment of comprehensive schools has further promoted cross-ethnic understanding and the development of bilingual skills by providing bilingual education within the school [1]. To enhance bilingual education, the government has extended the time for students to be exposed to the second language and has doubled the weight of the second language component in the exams [4]. Furthermore, based on students' academic abilities, they are divided into three educational tracks: the regular bilingual class, the intensive bilingual class, and the monolingual class, to address the various challenges they encounter in bilingual learning [1]. Studies have shown that Singapore has developed targeted bilingual education strategies by studying children from multilingual backgrounds. These strategies cover grammar teaching, the use of the mother tongue, as well as the cultivation of phonological awareness, morphological awareness, and syntactic awareness [3].

Shared reading, as a standard early language teaching method, is widely used to help children develop their vocabulary and reading comprehension skills. Wolf and Bokhorst-Heng explored the application of shared reading in Singapore, emphasizing that this method enables children to deeply understand the story's plot and acquire new vocabulary through the interactive questioning and comments from adults. This interactive reading not only enhances language skills, but also promotes the social and emotional development of children (they learn cooperative and sharing behaviors through the stories). Studies have shown that repeatedly reading the same book can effectively help children consolidate their memory of new vocabulary.

2.3. Influencing factors

Bilingual education in Singapore is influenced by multiple factors. The primary factor is the difference in family language environment, which poses significant learning challenges for students

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from non-native language families [1]. The quality and quantity of language input directly affect language proficiency: the more family language input children receive, the stronger their language ability will be [2]. Furthermore, the situation of language use within the family, the degree of language contact, and the bilingual ability of children all significantly affect their reading comprehension ability [3]. The allocation of educational resources (such as the quality of teachers) has a significant impact on the effectiveness of bilingual education. The rapid transition from Chinese-language schools to English-language schools requires a large-scale training of English teachers, which in turn will affect the quality of education. Social and economic factors are equally important, The correlation between English and employment opportunities has led parents to be more inclined to have their children learn English, thereby influencing the implementation of bilingual education policies [1].

As a nation of immigrants, the Singaporean government emphasizes maintaining equality and multiculturalism in its language and education policies. The government and society highly regard English's unique usefulness [6]. Using vernacular languages in the household was mentioned as one reason for the complexity of bilingual education. Hierarchical power relations in various language markets influence bilingual education policies [7].

In terms of individual differences, older children develop language more rapidly than younger children, possibly due to greater cognitive maturity [2]. Teachers' and parents' attitudes are also crucial. Studies have shown that the main objectives of the Ministry of Education's English curriculum have not been achieved and that pedagogy is mainly teacher-centered [5]. Studies have found that children with larger bilingual receptive vocabularies and frequent use of both languages have improved socioemotional and behavioral skills. Bilingual proficiency was found to have a positive correlation with pro-social skills. Gender and emotion recognition skills were also significantly correlated with children's socio-emotional and behavioral skills [4].

3. Inspiration

Bilingual education refers to various definitions and practices worldwide, but it primarily involves educational models aimed at simultaneously developing proficiency in two languages [8]. In Singapore, the approach to bilingual education is widely recognized internationally, with educators and policymakers praising it as a crucial element of the country's educational success. Singapore’s education system mandates a bilingual curriculum from the start, requiring students to learn English as their primary language alongside their mother tongue—either Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil—throughout their academic journey. This dual-language requirement is not just a curricular choice; it is embedded in national policy and reflects Singapore’s multicultural society.

In the education system of Singapore, bilingual education begins in kindergarten and continues throughout the entire secondary school period. During the primary school stage, the government implemented a three-track system, dividing students into the regular bilingual program, the accelerated bilingual program, and the special bilingual program based on their language proficiency and interest tendencies [6]. This model aims to customize educational plans based on individual students' abilities, to cultivate students with multilingual skills. This flexible system not only enhances students' language skills but also offers diverse educational options to meet the needs of different student groups.

Compared with Singapore, China implemented the bilingual education policy in Chinese and English later and with a weaker foundation. Shi pointed out that the rise of bilingual education in China is attributed to economic development and the demands of globalization [6], but its development process faces multiple challenges. It is worth noting that although China clearly proposed the bilingual education policy as early as 2001, there are still deficiencies in terms of teaching resources, curriculum development, and teacher training. This study emphasizes that the

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bilingual education system in China has problems such as a late start, weak foundation, imbalance in the development of teaching materials, courses and teaching resources, and the lack of comprehensive support policies has further exacerbated the situation.

The immersive education model aims to help students achieve high-level bilingual proficiency. However, implementing this model in the specific context of English as a foreign language in China poses challenges, which from the unique environment of bilingual education in China [9]. The analysis of the bilingual education project in South China shows that the localization strategy can effectively support the development of the native language, promote cumulative bilingual education, and meet the needs of students with similar English proficiency. This project employs bilingual teachers and incorporates the characteristics of the local native language community in the classroom culture. The innovation lies in the combination of some immersive teaching methods with short-term complete immersion teaching.

The differences in social and cultural backgrounds between China and Singapore have shaped the unique development paths of bilingual education in the two countries. Tong et al. pointed out that as a multi-ethnic country, China emphasizes domestic unity in its language policy, despite the existence of cultural diversity [10]. Chinese English education mainly focuses on the higher education stage. Particularly in specialized courses and general courses, the use of English is relatively low. In contrast, Singapore integrates bilingual education into early childhood education, which aligns with its national policies and aims to promote cultural inheritance and social cohesion.

4. Conclusions

By examining the bilingual education policies of Singapore and China, the effective practices of Singapore hold particularly significant implications for China's reference. Its flexible three-track diversion model and customized educational programs based on students' individual potential have provided valuable insights for China. This model ensures that students receive appropriate education at different academic stages, thereby enhancing the overall quality of education. In response to the phenomenon of disconnection between policies and practices, this study emphasizes the need to improve teacher professional development and transform school culture. Although the policies have granted schools greater autonomy, educators and administrators must adhere to the original intentions of the policies during the implementation process, and avoid overly emphasizing examinations and assessment results.

The balance that Singapore has achieved between English education and mother tongue education offers valuable experience for cultural inheritance in the era of globalization. By making English the official language and preserving cultural identity through the mother tongue, Singapore enables its students to both stand on the international stage and maintain their cultural roots. China can adopt this model, which not only strengthens the role of Chinese as a carrier of cultural heritage, but also promotes English education to enhance cultural confidence.

Finally, the innovation and practicality in Singapore's bilingual education also merit attention and can be adopted as a model. Singapore enhances students' learning efficiency and language proficiency through technological integration and innovative teaching methods. This teaching model that emphasizes practice and innovation has greatly benefited Singaporean students in their language learning. China's bilingual education can draw on this experience and enhance students' language learning outcomes by introducing more technological means and adopting innovative teaching methods.

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