

A Comparative Study on National Consciousness Elements in Foreign Language Education Policies of China and the United States: Based on Critical Discourse Analysis Theory

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Abstract: This study takes Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the theoretical framework, combining with corpus linguistics methods, to conduct a systematic comparative study on the elements of national consciousness in 11 core foreign language education policy texts of China and the United States. The study constructs policy corpora for both countries, and based on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework (description of text - interpretation of discursive practice - explanation of social practice) and Wang Zhen's "three-dimensional structure of national consciousness" (national cognition - national identity - national responsibility), it analyzes the differences in discursive representation of national consciousness elements and their social contextual driving factors from the lexical, sentential, and textual levels. The results show that: U.S. foreign language education policy constructs an "instrumental-exclusive" national consciousness discourse centered on "national security and global competition", with its key words centering on "security", "military", and "competition", reflecting the needs of hegemonic strategy and global capital expansion; China, on the other hand, forms an "educational-inclusive" national consciousness discourse focused on "cultural inheritance and international exchange", with key words focusing on "culture", "development", and "core literacy", reflecting the orientation of peaceful development and high-quality development. Both countries recognize the national strategic value of foreign language education, but their functional orientations are significantly different. This study fills the research gap in the national consciousness dimension in existing comparisons of Sino-U.S. foreign language education policies and provides a new perspective for understanding the interactive relationship between educational policies and national consciousness.

1. Introduction

As a concrete embodiment of national will in the field of education, foreign language education policy not only undertakes the basic functions of cultivating talents and promoting cross-cultural communication, but also embodies the country's in-depth aspirations for its own development orientation, international strategic layout, and the transmission of core values. Among them, the elements of national consciousness, as the implicit core of policy texts, directly reflect a country's ideological orientation in setting foreign language education goals, selecting teaching content, and planning implementation paths, serving as a key link connecting educational practice and national interests^[1]. With the deepening of globalization and the dynamic evolution of the international landscape, the strategic value of foreign language education has become increasingly prominent — it has evolved from mere language skill transmission to an important tool for countries to participate in international competition, shape international images, safeguard cultural security, and achieve geopolitical goals.

As the world's two most influential economies, China and the United States exhibit distinct characteristics in their foreign language education policies due to fundamental differences in historical traditions, social systems, cultural genes, and international strategies^[2-4]. The United States' foreign language education policy has long been deeply tied to national security, military

deployment, and global economic competitiveness, emphasizing the improvement of language proficiency to serve geopolitical and hegemony maintenance needs. In contrast, China focuses more on using foreign languages as a medium to disseminate Chinese culture and enhance national cultural soft power, highlighting the coordinated cultivation of "cultural confidence" and "international perspective", and striving to build a bridge for international exchanges through foreign language education^[5-8].

However, existing academic research on Sino-US foreign language education policies still has significant limitations: First, international studies mostly focus on the phased implementation of China's foreign language education policies (such as English teaching reform in basic education) or the historical evolution of US policies, rarely conducting systematic comparisons from the core perspective of "national consciousness", and lacking critical examination of the ideological construction behind policy texts^[9-12]. Second, although domestic studies pay attention to the macro comparison of Sino-US policies, they mostly stay at superficial elements such as curriculum design, teacher training, and evaluation systems, failing to deeply analyze the discursive representation of national consciousness in policy texts and its interaction mechanism with political, economic, and cultural contexts. Third, existing studies mainly adopt qualitative analysis methods, lacking empirical support based on corpus linguistics, making it difficult to objectively and systematically reveal the distribution patterns and functional logic of national consciousness elements in policy discourse^[13-15].

Against this backdrop, this study conducts an in-depth comparison of the elements of national consciousness in Sino-US foreign language education policies using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as the theoretical framework and combining corpus linguistics methods. This not only fills the gaps in existing research but also represents an innovative exploration of the interactive relationship between "educational policy — national consciousness — social context"^[16-19].

2. Data Situation

This study takes foreign language education policy texts of China and the United States as the core research data. A corpus is constructed through systematic selection and standardized processing, and quantitative and qualitative analyses are conducted using professional tools to ensure the authority, representativeness, and applicability of the data. The following details the research data from three aspects: data sources and selection criteria, data processing tools, and corpus construction and basic characteristics.

2.1 Data Sources and Selection Criteria

2.1.1 Data Sources

All research data are derived from officially released foreign language education policy texts of China and the United States, with specific sources featuring clear authority and credibility:

U.S. policy texts: Core policy documents issued by official agencies such as the U.S. Department of State and the Department of Defense, covering national-level foreign language education strategies, standards, and implementation plans.

Chinese policy texts: Guiding documents released by official departments including the Ministry of Education of China and the State Language Work Committee of China, including curriculum standards, teaching requirements, and development plans.

2.1.2 Selection Criteria

To ensure the data effectively reflect the discursive characteristics of "national consciousness elements", the selection of policy texts strictly adheres to the following four principles:

Official Nature: All texts are formal policy documents issued by educational and related competent authorities of the two countries, with statutory effect and guiding significance, directly embodying the institutionalized expression of national will in the field of foreign language education.

Representativeness: The selected policies cover key areas of Sino-U.S. foreign language education (e.g., basic education, higher education, language proficiency standards, and national strategy alignment) and are core documents with far-reaching impacts on domestic foreign language education development, avoiding fragmented and marginalized texts.

Specificity: The content of the texts must include practical details such as clear teaching objectives, curriculum requirements, and evaluation standards, rather than vague principled statements, to ensure the extraction of analyzable discursive details of national consciousness elements.

Accessibility: The texts are sourced from official websites and authoritative educational databases of the two countries, facilitating access to complete versions and updated information, and ensuring the reproducibility and verifiability of the data.

2.1.3 Final List of Selected Policy Texts

Based on the above criteria, 11 policy texts were ultimately selected as the research corpus, including 6 from the United States and 5 from China, as shown in the table 1 below:

Table 1 Details of the research corpus

Country	No.	Policy Text Title	Core Content Area
U.S.	A-1	A Call to Action For National Foreign Language Capabilities	National foreign language capability development initiative
	A-2	Defense Language Transformation Roadmap	Defense language education transformation plan
	A-3	International Education Policy	Alignment of international education strategy and foreign languages
	A-4	National Foreign Language Standards Impact and Influence After a Decade Plus	Evaluation of foreign language standards implementation effects
	A-5	National Security Language Act	National security language legislation framework
	A-6	National Security Language Initiative	National security language promotion program
China	B-1	A Guide to Teaching English at the University	Higher education English teaching norms
	B-2	College English Curriculum Requirements	College English proficiency training requirements
	B-3	English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education	Basic education English curriculum guidelines
	B-4	National Standards for Teaching Quality in Foreign Languages and Literature	Foreign language major talent training standards
	B-5	The 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the National Language Program	Overall language development plan

2.2 Data Processing Tools

This study adopts corpus linguistics methods for quantitative analysis of policy texts, with the core tool being the corpus analysis software The Prime Machine HD (V1.33) developed by Stephen Jeaco. This software features multi-dimensional text processing functions to meet the research needs for systematic analysis of policy texts.

2.3 Corpus Construction and Basic Characteristics

For targeted analysis, the 11 policy texts are divided into two main corpora by country, and further split into 11 sub-corpora (corresponding to individual policy texts) to facilitate comparison

of discursive characteristics across different policies. Basic information of the corpora (token count, type count, sentence count) is generated through The Prime Machine HD software, as detailed below:

2.3.1 U.S. Foreign Language Education Policy Corpus (Corpora A)

Integrated from 6 U.S. policy texts, it has a total token count of 26,847, including 3,013 types and 923 sentences. The specific characteristics of each sub-corpus are shown in the table 2 below:

Table 2 the specific characteristics of each sub-corpus

Sub-corpus No.	Policy Text Title	Token Count	Type Count	Sentence Count
A-1	A Call to Action For National Foreign Language Capabilities	5,133	1,076	156
A-2	Defense Language Transformation Roadmap	5,862	1,078	277
A-3	International Education Policy	1,323	430	40
A-4	National Foreign Language Standards Impact and Influence After a Decade Plus	8,322	1,544	286
A-5	National Security Language Act	5,251	811	133
A-6	National Security Language Initiative	956	346	31
Total	-	26,847	3,013	923

2.3.2 Chinese Foreign Language Education Policy Corpus (Corpora B)

Integrated from 5 Chinese policy texts, it has a total token count of 32,584, including 4,063 types and 327 sentences. The specific characteristics of each sub-corpus are shown in the table 3 below:

Table 3 The specific characteristics of each sub-corpus

Sub-corpus No.	Policy Text Title	Token Count	Type Count	Sentence Count
B-1	A Guide to Teaching English at the University	10,986	1,460	114
B-2	College English Curriculum Requirements	5,305	1,034	54
B-3	English Curriculum Standards for Compulsory Education	18,739	2,529	115
B-4	National Standards for Teaching Quality in Foreign Languages and Literature	2,960	775	22
B-5	The 13th Five-Year Plan for the Development of the National Language Program	4,988	1,067	22
Total	-	32,584	4,063	327

2.3.3 Core Analysis Dimensions of the Corpora

Based on Wang Zhen's "three-dimensional structure of national consciousness" (national cognition — national identity — national responsibility), the study extracts keywords and contexts conforming to this framework from the two corpora using The Prime Machine HD software, forming a "national consciousness element discourse corpus". The specific analysis dimensions include:

Lexical level: Distribution and collocation of high-frequency nouns (e.g., "security", "culture"), verbs (e.g., "maintain", "disseminate"), adjectives (e.g., "international", "national"), and modal verbs (e.g., "must").

Sentential level: Grammatical structure, rhetorical features, and expressive tendency of core sentences containing national consciousness elements.

Textual level: Thematic distribution, logical relationships, and narrative framework of national consciousness elements in policy texts.

Through the above data construction and processing, the study achieves the dual support of "quantitative statistics — qualitative positioning" for Sino-U.S. foreign language education policy

texts, laying a solid data foundation for subsequent analysis of discursive differences in national consciousness elements.

3. Analysis

Based on Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (description of text — interpretation of discursive practice — explanation of social practice) and combined with quantitative data from the corpus tool The Prime Machine HD, this study conducts a systematic comparative analysis of the national consciousness elements in the Sino-U.S. foreign language education policy corpora, aiming to reveal the differences in the discursive representation of national consciousness in the two sets of policies and their underlying causes.

3.1 Influence of Political Context: Divide Between Hegemonic Strategy and Peaceful Development

As a global hegemonic power, the "security orientation" in U.S. foreign language education policy stems from the need for "global strategic deployment" after the Cold War — enhancing intelligence collection and regional control through improved language proficiency (e.g., "defense language transformation" in A-2 serves military transformation), essentially maintaining its geopolitical advantages.

As a major developing country, China adheres to the path of "peaceful development". The "cultural orientation" in its foreign language education policy echoes the diplomatic concept of "building a community with a shared future for mankind". It enhances international recognition through "cultural dissemination" (e.g., "expanding the international influence of Chinese" in B-5) and avoids the instrumental abuse of language education.

3.2 Influence of Economic Context: Differences between Global Competition and Endogenous Development

The "globalized layout" of the U.S. economy requires foreign language education to serve transnational capital expansion and market competition. For example, "compete successfully in the global economy" in A-3 explicitly links foreign language proficiency to economic competitiveness, focusing on cultivating talents in "international business and finance".

China's economy is in a stage of "high-quality development", so its foreign language education focuses more on serving "domestic demand upgrading" and "coordinated opening-up". For example, "cultivate foreign language talents adaptable to economic and social development" in B-2 supports both international trade and international technological cooperation in domestic industrial upgrading.

3.3 Influence of Cultural Context: Emphasis on Multicultural Integration vs. Traditional Inheritance

As an "immigrant country", the U.S. has a diverse cultural context, but the "cultural elements" in its foreign language education policy still serve pragmatic goals — for example, "culture" in A-4 is often collocated with "regional expertise", emphasizing the "instrumental understanding" of target regional cultures rather than in-depth identification.

With a continuous 5,000-year cultural tradition, the "culture" element in Chinese policies centers on "inheritance and confidence". For example, "deepen understanding of Chinese culture and strengthen cultural identity" in B-3 achieves the dual enhancement of "cultural export" and "self-identification" through foreign language education.

3.4 Core Findings

Through the three-dimensional framework analysis, it is evident that the national consciousness elements in Sino-U.S. foreign language education policies exhibit fundamental differences: The United States constructs an "instrumental-exclusive" national consciousness discourse centered on "national security and global competition"; China forms an "educational-inclusive" national consciousness discourse focused on "cultural inheritance and international exchange". These

differences not only reflect the social systems and international positioning of the two countries but also mirror the different functional orientations of foreign language education in national strategies.

4. Conclusions

This study utilized Fairclough's three-dimensional Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework combined with corpus linguistics approaches to conduct a systematic comparison of national consciousness elements embedded in 11 core foreign language education policy texts from China and the United States. The research aimed to unpack cross-national differences in the discursive representation of national consciousness, its interaction with broader social contexts, and the underlying drivers shaping these divergences.

4.1 Fundamental Divergences in Discursive Representation of National Consciousness

Integrated quantitative and qualitative analysis uncovered distinct patterns in the carriers, logical structures, and directional orientations of national consciousness elements across the two countries' policies:

Keyword collocations and logical frameworks: U.S. policies revolve around terms such as "security," "military," and "competition," establishing a linear logic of "foreign language proficiency → safeguarding national interests"—exemplified by initiatives like the "National Security Language Initiative." In contrast, Chinese policies center on "culture," "development," and "core literacy," constructing a dual-oriented system of "foreign language proficiency → cultural dissemination + individual development," as reflected in the emphasis on "cultural confidence + international perspective."

Discursive practice dynamics: U.S. policies operate under a "government-military-institution" leadership model, positioning students as "implementers of national strategy" (e.g., encouraging study abroad to acquire regional language skills for security objectives). Chinese policies, by contrast, adopt a student-centered approach, with teachers and schools acting as "facilitators of education" who prioritize interactive practices such as "guiding students in comparing Chinese and foreign cultures."

Identity construction logics: U.S. policies exhibit exclusivity through discourses of "critical language" and "threats," framing foreign language education within an "us vs. them" binary. Chinese policies, however, embrace inclusivity by emphasizing "learning from international experience" and "respecting cultural diversity," fostering equal "self-other" dialogue through intercultural communication.

4.2 Contextual Drivers of Cross-National Differences

These discursive disparities are rooted in the synergistic interplay of political, economic, and cultural contexts in the two nations:

Political context: As a global hegemon, the United States frames foreign language proficiency as a "strategic resource for national security" to advance geopolitical control. China, adhering to a path of peaceful development, leverages foreign language education as a "carrier of cultural soft power" to cultivate its image as a "responsible major power."

Economic context: U.S. policies are tailored to "global capital expansion," linking language skills directly to "international market competition." Chinese policies, aligned with the goal of "high-quality development," balance "opening-up and cooperation" with "domestic industrial upgrading."

Cultural context: The United States' "immigrant multiculturalism" leads to an "instrumental understanding" of culture, which is tied to regional strategic needs. China, with its 5,000-year continuous cultural tradition, prioritizes "cultural inheritance" with "cultural confidence" as its core.

4.3 Shared Consensus

Despite these differences, both countries recognize the strategic value of foreign language education as a "pillar of national strength" and emphasize the alignment of "language proficiency

and practical application." The United States focuses on applying this alignment to military, intelligence, and diplomatic domains, while China prioritizes intercultural communication, international trade, and technological cooperation.

In essence, foreign language education policies are institutionalized manifestations of a nation's ideology and strategy. The U.S. orientation toward "security and competition" and China's focus on "culture and cooperation" reflect inherent differences in their international positioning, social systems, and cultural traditions. For China, balancing cultural confidence with international learning remains critical to cultivating talents with "national sentiment and global vision"—a key response to the strategic role of foreign language education in an increasingly globalized world.

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