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Innovations in undergraduate programs in Russian as a foreign language in Chinese higher education institutions

As one of official languages of the United Nations, Russian plays an important role in China, given the long history of Sino-Russian relations. Especially in recent years, with the development of globalization and technological revolution, society's demand for diversification of talents' skills has become increasingly obvious. Thereby, Russian language education faces changes. In this study, characteristics of Russian language education system before implementing economic reforms in 1978 were reviewed. The innovative changes in modern stage were analyzed based on a review of undergraduate Russian language programs in Chinese universities. Based on a comparative analysis of traditions and innovations we propose predictions and recommendations for the future Russian language education in China.

Key words: Program plan, Russian as a foreign language, training model, traditions, innovations

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Инновации в программах бакалавриата по русскому языку как иностранному в китайских вузах

Учитывая долгую историю китайско-российских отношений, русский язык играет важную роль в Китае. Особенно в последние годы, с развитием глобализации и технологической революции, потребность общества в диверсификации навыков кадров становится все более очевидной. Таким образом, в русском языковом образовании происходят изменения. В этом исследовании были рассмотрены характеристики системы русского языкового образования до проведения экономических реформ в 1978 г. Инновационные изменения на современном этапе были проанализированы на основе обзора программ бакалавриата по русскому языку в китайских университетах. На основе сравнительного анализа традиций и инноваций были предложены прогнозы и рекомендации для будущего русского языкового образования в Китае.

Ключевые слова: план учебной программы, русский язык как иностранный, модель обучения, традиции в обучении русскому как иностранному, новации в обучении русскому как иностранному

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1. Introduction

In this article, the above 300-year Russian language teaching history in China is reviewed, especially the innovations in Russian language teaching since the 1978 reform and opening up. Innovation is “an inescapable feature of contemporary educational policy agendas” [Towndrow et al., 2010, p. 426]. In the “Third National High-Level Forum on the Construction

of Majors in the Russian Language in Colleges and Universities” held in 2014 and in the “National Seminar on the Development of Russian Language Teaching at Universities and Colleges” held in 2023, the Russian Language Teaching Committee of the Ministry of Education of China pointed out that all universities should actively explore the new training model, strengthen students’ cross-cultural communication abilities, and carry out Russian language education reform.¹ The innovative training model for talents learning the Russian language in universities has become a hot issue at present.

At the same time, because of the increasingly close relations between China and Russia, more and more Chinese are learning Russian year by year. As of 2018, the number of students studying Russian in schools and institutions in China has reached 61.000.² In 2013, Chinese President Xi Jinping proposed the “Belt and Road” international cooperative initiative. In recent years, the “Belt and Road” initiative has been solidly advanced and achieved remarkable results. Along with this, some problems and challenges have also emerged. According to the “Belt and Road” Big Data Report (2017), in terms of talent demand for the “Belt and Road”, talents with foreign language skills rank first in media and netizen attention [Ren, 2020]. Along the “Silk Road Economic Belt”, there are 15 countries where Russian is the official language or lingua franca, meaning that Russian-speaking countries account for 20% of the countries along the “Belt and Road” [Du, Li, 2019, p. 238]. The Chinese society’s demand for Russian-speaking talents is not limited to being able to speak Russian but also expects them to understand Russia’s national conditions and knowledge in other fields. This also requires colleges and universities to change the previous single teaching model that only taught Russian knowledge and innovate the training model.

We conducted a systematic review of peer-reviewed international research literature from 1951 to 2023 and used mixed methods to analyze undergraduate programs in Russian language at seven Chinese universities.

¹ Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press. Based on the cultivation of international communication capabilities, innovate the development path of Russian language education – The 8th National Academic Symposium on Teaching Methods for Russian Language Majors in Colleges and Universities and a Highend Forum on “Understanding Contemporary China”. Russian Language Series Textbooks and Curriculum. 2023. URL: <https://www.fltrp.com/c/2023-07-02/519501.shtml> (date accessed: 09.03.2024); SOHU. Cultivate moral character, uphold integrity and innovate – The 2023 National Seminar on the Development of Russian Language Teaching in Universities and Colleges was successfully held. 2023. URL: https://www.sohu.com/a/730276627_121124321 (date accessed: 09.03.2024).

² Sputnik. Russian Embassy in China: The popularity of Russian language in China continues to increase, and the number of students exceeds 60,000. 2018. <https://sputniknews.cn/20180606/1025580982.html> (date accessed: 09.03.2024).

It is necessary to sort out current innovative features, which help to find and solve existing or potential problems in current Russian language teaching and keep good points in traditional teaching.

The results of this study provide a reference for researchers, educators, and policymakers in the field of Russian language teaching to strengthen relevant practice and research activities in the future.

2. Research Questions

In this article, the following sub-questions were proposed:

- What was the model for training students who studied Russian in the past?
- What innovative changes have taken place in undergraduate programs in Russian as a foreign language since the reform and opening up?
- What is the future trend in training students who study Russian?

3. Literature review

3.1. Russian language education in China: A historical overview

The first Russian language school in China was opened by the Qing government in 1708 and was called the Russian Literature School. In the second half of the 19th century, the Qing government also opened schools in Shanghai (1863), Guangzhou (1864), and Hubei (1893) to teach Russian. The main purpose of early Russian language teaching was to nurture translators [Yan, 1999, p. 1–2; Hao, 2004, p. 58]. After the victory of the October Revolution, thanks to the spread of Marxism in China, the Russian language became more popular in China. Since 1920, majors in the Russian language have been offered at Shanghai University, Yan'an University, and other universities. Russian language teaching during this period attached great importance to the practice of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, and the teaching content and goals were closely connected with domestic and foreign situations. By the eve of 1949, there were 13 schools in China offering Russian language courses [Wang, Meng, 2005].

After the founding of the People's Republic of China, as it relied on the help of the Soviet Union in foreign policy, economic and trade exchanges, and scientific and technological development, talents who could speak Russian were in urgent need. Hereby, Russian language teaching developed rapidly. In 1951, a total of 36 universities established Russian language departments. By the mid-1950s, there was a surplus of Russian-speaking talent. As Sino-Soviet relations deteriorated, the number of people learning Russian decreased. From 1966 to 1976, due to the impact of the "Cultural Revolution", Russian language teaching was interrupted and just got restored after the revolution [Ibid].

The training of Russian language talents in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China (1945–1978) was mainly reflected in the following aspects.

1. The Russian talent training model is single. From 1953 to 1955, the National Russian Language Instruction Plan emphasized for three consecutive years that the teaching goal was to enable students to master basic Russian language and translation skills.

2. The training of Russian-speaking talents had a strong political purpose. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, Russian language education emphasized the need to serve politics. A large number of political courses were arranged in the curriculum. In the 1960s, Russian language teaching, as a part of foreign language education, was criticized and blocked due to the political struggle of the “Cultural Revolution”. It was restored in the 1970s as China regained its legal seat in the United Nations, but the teaching content at this time still had a strong political color [Liu, 2009].

3. Valuing practical skills. Most of the courses are practical, and courses were divided into reading, grammar, and translation to cultivate talents in international affairs and Russian language teaching. In 1965, at the Foreign Language Work Conference in Colleges and Universities, it was also proposed to reduce the theoretical parts of the teaching and enhance the practical training [Hao, 2010].

4. Keeping international exchanges. Since the 1950s, China had been continuously sending overseas students to study in the Soviet Union, including undergraduates, graduate students, visiting students, and interns. In 1956, the number of students sent to the Soviet Union reached 2100, accounting for 86% of the total number of students [Liu, 2001, 2009].

3.2. The contemporary landscape

The contemporary training model for talents learning the Russian language is more complete. After China implemented economic reform measures in 1978, China's economic, cultural, and technological exchanges with Russia and other Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries became more frequent. Sino-Russian trade in the Northeastern region at the junction of Russia and China promoted Russian language education. Undergraduate programs in Russian as a foreign language are offered at most colleges and universities. The Russian language is nationally considered a key program focus, and Russian language centers have been established. Many universities also have the right to award doctoral degrees in Russian language and literature. The syllabus that guides teaching work has also been improved year by year, becoming more reasonable, advanced,

practical, and operable. There has also been a Sino-Russian joint education model at the undergraduate level, among which the latest representative is Shenzhen BIT MSU University, located in Shenzhen, China, which was signed and established by the presidents of China and Russia. Meanwhile, the course structure has become fuller, with colorful courses such as Tourism Conversation, Russian for Science and Technology, and applied writing on foreign affairs and foreign trade. A series of courses on national conditions and culture, such as an overview of Russia, are also introduced to students. Teaching methods have also undergone considerable changes to adapt to today's era of technological revolution [Wang, Meng, 2005].

4. Methodology

In this study, the literature review method was used first. Official materials and literature in the Russian language talent training system after the founding of the People's Republic were collected, and the characteristics of the training program before and after the reform and opening up in 1978 were summarized and analyzed. Then, to figure out the innovations, using a sampling survey, seven universities were selected from those owning undergraduate programs in Russian as a foreign language (see Table 1).

Table 1

Surveyed Universities

| University | Class | Ranking |
|--|-------|---------|
| Peking University (PKU) | A+ | 1 |
| Beijing Foreign Studies University (BFSU) | A+ | 2 |
| Shanghai International Studies University (HISU) | A+ | 3 |
| Zhejiang University (ZJU) | A | 7 |
| Guangdong University of Foreign Studies (GDUFS) | A | 8 |
| Renmin University of China (RUC) | B+ | 17 |
| Wuhan University (WHU) | B+ | 25 |

Source: New college entrance examination website <https://www.hfplg.com/dxpm/11190.html>

According to China's new college entrance examination website, the programs in Russian at 117 universities were ranked from A+ to C (in alphabetical order, descending levels). In reporting the review, we followed the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) protocol [Page et al., 2021]. Sample screening was included if they met the following criteria:

1) Advanced universities with grades B+ and above can represent the direction and trend of Russian language education.

2) Universities having accessible, complete program plans for investigation.

3) Remove A-grade universities. Considering that the A-grade is close to the higher grades A and A+, to avoid excessive similarity, the A-grade is deleted.

4) Regional balance. Select representative universities by region (North, Central, East, and South) to avoid a large number of regional duplications.

The final sample comprised seven universities. Please see Figure 1 for the specific screening process.

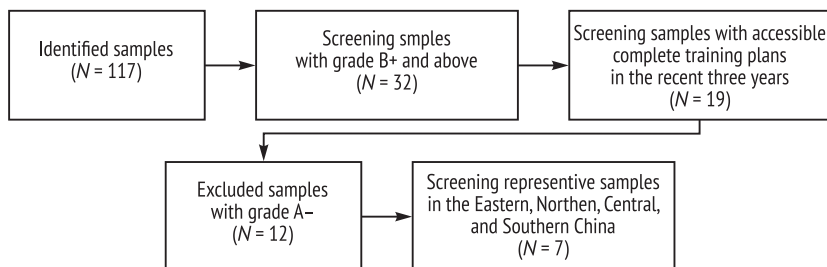


Fig. 1. Flow diagram illustrating the output selection procedures

The collected 7 plans were qualitatively and quantitatively analyzed from teaching objectives, training models, curriculum settings, teaching methods, and evaluation systems, so as to find the characteristics and trends of the current training system. Then, descriptive analysis was used to compare the past and present of Russian language teaching and conclude its traditions and innovations.

5. Results in innovative changes

5.1. Goal-oriented mode for interdisciplinary talent

In the program training objectives, it can be seen from Figure 2 that among the seven universities, nearly half of the universities emphasize the innovative spirit, and they all hope to develop interdisciplinary students with both Russian language skills and scientific and cultural knowledge (interdisciplinary knowledge) to apply their abilities in various industries.

In the school system, it can be seen from Figure 3 that basically the programs last four years, but about one-third of universities have a flexible school system, which is set to 3–6 years, and one-seventh of the universities permit studying the second program.

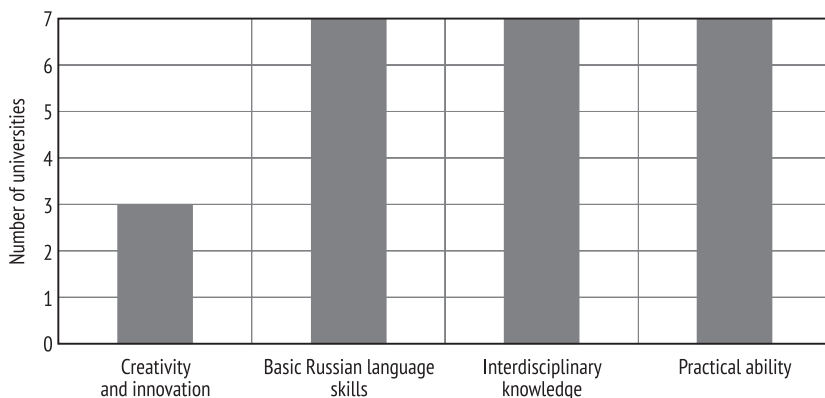


Fig. 2. Program objectives of surveyed universities

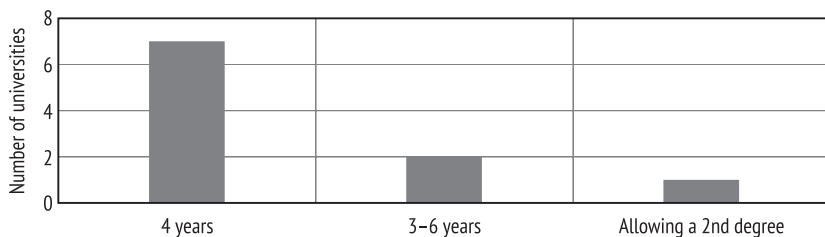


Fig. 3. School-year system of surveyed universities

In the training mode, there are four main training modes for Russian language programs: “Russian + another specific focus”, “Russian + second foreign language”, “Russian + tiny languages”, and “Russian + interdisciplinary degree”. Some higher education institutions utilize a single mode, while others use multiple modes [Dai, 2008, p. 337–339]. In the late 1990s, Shanghai International Studies University reformed the curriculum, and then students began to study courses in tiny languages for two years from their third semester. Besides, it not only takes the “Russian language + interdisciplinary knowledge” training mode but also uses the special advantages of language teaching to explore the “Russian + English” mode since the late 1990s [Ibid, p. 342]. Since 2005, Renmin University of China has tried to train compound talents with language skills. Its Russian Department, which cooperated with the School of Law, the School of International Relations, and the School of Business, launched the interdisciplinary training model of “Russian + Intellectual Property”, “Russian + International Politics”, and “Russian + Business Administration” [Hao, 2010, p. 52]. Combining universities’

specific advantages to build distinctive Russian programs is the best way to develop talents with Russian skills and cross-disciplinary knowledge at comprehensive universities.

Such a goal of cultivating interdisciplinary talents is oriented toward Russian language teaching in the 21st century. Especially with the advent of the knowledge economy, the demand for foreign language talents in society has shown a trend of diversification. In 1998, the national document “Guidance on the Reform of Undergraduate Education for Foreign Language Majors in the 21st Century” was issued, pointing out that there are five incompatibilities with social development existing in foreign language education: the incompatibility of ideas and concepts, talent training models, curriculum setting and teaching content, students’ knowledge structure, students’ ability and quality, and teaching management. Programs in foreign languages in China have generally neglected to connect with other humanities and natural sciences in the curriculum setting and teaching content. In the previous language skills training, imitation and memory were often emphasized, but students’ critical thinking ability, innovation ability, and problem-solving ability were ignored. Foreign language majors must shift from a single-discipline “scholastic” talent training model to an application-based and compound talent training model [The steering committee of foreign language major teaching..., 2001, p. 376–386].

According to the 2003 “Teaching Syllabus for the Improvement of Undergraduate Russian Language Programs”, the goal of cultivating interdisciplinary talents was introduced: “cultivate students with a solid Russian language foundation and broad cultural knowledge and be able to use them proficiently”. Russian-speaking interdisciplinary talents will be engaged in translation, teaching, research, and management in foreign affairs, education, economy and trade, news, science and technology, the military, and other departments [Lin, 2004, p. 34].

5.2. Focus on practical skills

In order to make Russian teaching adapt to the needs of society and economic development, enhance the practicability of the curriculum, and improve the communicative ability of students, in recent years, various colleges and universities have added different extending curricula to their programs.

From the perspective of curriculum setting, in addition to compulsory courses, see Table 2. Half of the universities offer courses in Russian media reading, language, and translation. And nearly one-third of the universities provide Russian courses in international business trade. Moreover, the Russian language teaching in each university focuses on the combination of language and economics, law, media, translation, and other practical fields.

Table 2

Elective courses provided by the surveyed universities

| Elective Course | University |
|--|---|
| Russian for Foreign Trade | Beijing Foreign Studies University Renmin University of China |
| Russian Law | Beijing Foreign Studies University |
| Russian Regional Studies | Beijing Foreign Studies University |
| Russian Culture (Folk Literature, Customs, Movies, Culture, Drama) | Beijing Foreign Studies University Renmin University of China Peking University |
| Russian media reading | Beijing Foreign Studies University Shanghai International Studies University Wuhan University |
| Ukrainian language | Beijing Foreign Studies University Wuhan University |
| Language and translation | Beijing Foreign Studies University Renmin University of China Peking University |

5.3. Consideration of cultural understanding

From Table 2, it can be seen that in terms of curriculum, nearly half of the universities offer the elective course of Russian culture, which includes learning Russian folk literature, customs, movies, national culture, and drama. Besides, Ukrainian is taught in nearly a third of schools.

Contemporary Russian language teaching attaches great importance to cultural understanding. In the past, teachers only paid attention to the explanation and training of language knowledge, ignoring the imparting of cultural knowledge. As a result, students had difficulties communicating with Russian native speakers, and they were not well qualified for work after graduation. Therefore, the 2003 “Teaching Syllabus for Russian Majors in Colleges and Universities” stated that students should “have a better understanding of Russian history, geography, literature, cultural traditions, social status, customs, etc.” In the chapter “Explanation on Curriculum Setting”, the syllabus once again emphasized the need to cultivate students’ cross-cultural communication skills [Lin, 2004, p. 34]. Students’ sensitivity to the identification of cultural differences between China and Russia should be enhanced.

5.4. Emphasis in the language ability

In terms of credit setting, Figure 4 shows that at all seven surveyed universities, the proportion of courses in language training accounts for more than 50% of the total credits, and nearly half of the schools account for more than 70%, which proves the importance of language training to the entire program.

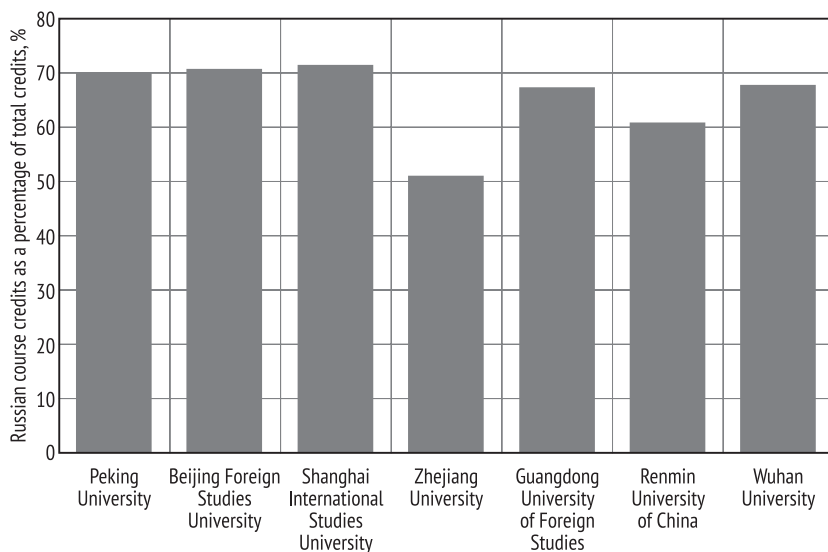


Fig. 4. Proportion of Russian course credits in the surveyed universities

In the curriculum structure, the core courses of all surveyed universities cover the four aspects of Russian listening, speaking, reading, and writing, including basic Russian, advanced Russian, Russian grammar, translation theory and practice, practical grammar, and Russian-Chinese translation. Besides that, courses in newspaper reading are offered at four universities; courses such as oral language training, international relations, and diplomacy with Russia are added at Wuhan University, Beijing Foreign Studies University, Shanghai International Studies University, and Beijing Foreign Studies University. It suggests universities pay more attention to basic Russian language ability so as to apply it to practice. Meanwhile, different types of universities show their own specialties in course settings.

5.5. Use of assistive technology

With the advent of the Internet era and the vigorous development of multimedia technology, foreign language teaching in China has also entered a new era of technological revolution [Liu, 2009]. The use of multimedia and assistive technology in Russian teaching is becoming more frequent. Russian teachers take good advantage of multimedia interactive learning to benefit students in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Students practice listening through audio, practice speaking, and learn about national culture through videos. At the same time, a course on the general Russian language is offered on the MOOCs of Chinese universities. This course provides students who like Russian culture or plan to study in Russia with the opportunity to learn Russian phonetics and grammar. On the MOOC platform of Chinese foreign language universities, a serious number of Russian language courses provided by experts and professors have also been developed, as shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3

Russian courses provided on MOOC Platforms

| Course | University |
|--|--|
| Russian Introductory Course | Beijing Foreign Studies University |
| Introduction to Russian Literature | Heilongjiang University |
| Basic Russian | Peking University |
| Russian Interpretation in International Business | Dalian University of Foreign Languages |
| Regional Overview of Russia | Dalian University of Foreign Languages |

5.6. Developed evaluation system

The Russian language evaluation system has also been improved. The College Russian Test Fourth and Eighth (CRT-4 and CRT-8) examination system was established [Liu, 2007]. It is a national Russian language proficiency exam sponsored by the Foreign Language Professional Teaching Steering Committee of Colleges and Universities. In Chinese universities, it is the basic requirement for graduation to pass the CRT-4 (ТРЯ4, Тесты по русскому языку – 4-й уровень, equivalent to Russian as a foreign language level 1, B1). The exam is usually held in the second year of undergraduate studies (see Table 4). It is not only necessary to check the students' mastery

of language theory but also to check their ability to use this knowledge to listen, speak, read, and write; the two main sessions account for roughly 40% and 60%, respectively.

Table 4

College Russian Test-4
(Тест по русскому языку – 4-й уровень)

| | |
|--|---|
| First part: objective test (120 minutes) | Dictation, listening comprehension, comprehensive knowledge (including grammar, vocabulary, functional idea and knowledge of national conditions), reading comprehension, cloze |
| Second part: subjective test (50 minutes) | Man-machine dialogue, oral expression and writing |
| Total score | 100 points |
| Test time | 187 minutes (Including a break between two parts) |

In addition, in the fourth grade of undergraduate courses, students are invited to pass the College Russian Test-8 (equivalent to level 2 of Russian as a foreign language, B2). That's not a must for them. There are six parts in the CET-8 test for Russian majors: listening comprehension, reading comprehension, comprehensive knowledge, oral expression, translation, and writing (see Table 5). The first three are objective questions, and the last three are subjective questions.

Table 5

College Russian Test-8
(Тест по русскому языку – 8-й уровень)

| | |
|-----------------------|---|
| First session | Oral expression, listening comprehension, reading comprehension and general knowledge (grammar, vocabulary, rhetoric, literature and national conditions and culture) |
| Second session | Translation and writing |
| Total score | 100 points |
| Test time | 180 minutes |

The syllabus will be issued for each level of the exam, and accordingly, there are official Russian question banks for students to practice.

Such an evaluation system makes the whole Russian language education more systematic. It gives students the opportunity and motivation to improve their Russian language skills in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and also provides teachers with a clearer guiding framework.

6. Discussion

Through the research, it was found that the current Russian language training system inherits part of the early traditions, all of which pay great attention to the mastery of basic Russian language knowledge and the practical ability of Russian and provide students with as many international exchange opportunities as possible.

At the same time, there are many innovations in Russian language education today.

In terms of teaching purpose, it has changed from cultivating translators and teachers serving politics to cultivating interdisciplinary talents with innovative spirit, Russian language ability, and cross-professional culture and knowledge.

In the training mode, the Russian language program undergoes a change from a three-year or four-year schooling system to a 4–6-year schooling system, from single studies of language itself to adding a second degree as a minor, giving Russian-speaking talents more flexibility in terms of time and more possibilities to enrich and extend knowledge.

In the curriculum setting, within the early Russian language teaching, apart from language courses and practical training courses, there were mainly political history courses, while courses in other subjects accounted for a small proportion. However, the current Russian language teaching provides students with a wider range of courses, from Russian culture to the economy, from the national conditions to the law, from the media to the Ukrainian language.

In the teaching methods, the traditional offline teaching has been transformed into a multimedia-assisted teaching mode, which gives students access to rich learning resources, and they can even start a self-study mode.

In the evaluation system, there has never been a systematic evaluation model for Russian undergraduates during the early teaching period, but now there is a national evaluation system with the fourth and eighth levels for Russian majors.

7. Conclusion

Although there are these differences and innovations, both the early and current Russian language education systems are essentially influenced by international politics and national socioeconomic development. It's just that the early Russian language teaching system was more affected by politics, with ups and downs, and the training plan at that time was based on the Soviet education model. The current development of Russian language education tends to be more stable, which stems from the stable diplomatic

relations between China and Russia as well as the Russian language training system that Chinese colleges and universities have explored for a long time to suit China's national conditions.

Under the current good development of Sino-Russian relations, Chinese universities can develop more opportunities for cooperation and exchanges with Russian universities in the form of cooperative teaching projects, international exchanges, forums, seminars, etc. In the context of educational digitization, multimedia-assisted Russian teaching is becoming more and more popular. Russian teachers can make full use of multimedia to improve teaching effects and, at the same time, be careful to avoid over-reliance on multimedia and hinder negative effects on students' writing and other practices. As for the evaluation system, it could be considered to enrich the classification because there are currently only two levels: Level 4 and Level 8. The current curriculum could continue to focus on practice and give students more opportunities to use Russian in real conversations. Additionally, more activities to facilitate understanding of Russia, such as Russian cultural festivals, can be carried out.

Moreover, with the promotion of international relations and economic development, the single teaching mode no longer meets the needs of social development. In the future, the training of Russian language talents will continue to develop towards a compound mode. The curriculum setting, evaluation system, teaching mode, and other aspects will also keep moving towards a more systematic and mature trend.

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