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Bildung in Germany and Its Implications for Chinese Adult Language Education

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Bildung in Germany and Its Implications for Chinese Adult Language Education

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Asian Adult Education Annual Conference

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The purpose of the Asian Adult Education Conference (AAE) is to provide a platform for academic exchange among researchers and scholars in adult and continuing education, as well as higher education, from the East, West, and Rest, especially those who are interested in conducting research related to Asian and Asian Diaspora adult education theory and practice. It seeks to promote mutual learning, enhance shared understanding, and stimulate academic viewpoints and dialogue from various perspectives from global educators. Selected presentation papers are published in peer-reviewed conference proceedings.

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Abstract
Examining and integrating the Bildung theories of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Lene Rachel Andersen, this paper suggests implications to overcome the current challenges in Chinese adult language education.

Keywords: Bildung, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Lene Rachel Andersen, adult language education, implications

The concept of "Bildung" in German has rich history rooted in European thinking. Difficult to render in English as it is, loosely, we can regard it as education, cultivation, and personal formation. In this paper, the Bildung theories of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Lene Rachel Andersen will be included, the former being one of the leading German educators in the 18th century and the latter a famous Danish philosopher and Bildung activist. Despite the temporal and cultural differences, there is a clear inheritance and pragmatic innovation in their ideas.

In recent years, internationalization has been regarded as one of the significant trends in the advancement of higher education (UNESCO, 2000). However, one barrier to achieving the internationalization of higher education is "the absence of a common language for the complexity of international education and for the need to employ multi-perspective and system-oriented thinking" (UNESCO, 2000). Indeed, this is what needs to be addressed in the context of Chinese adult higher education. According to Education First's English Proficiency Index 2022, China generally attained a Low Proficiency ranking among all countries and regions included. Additionally, the statistics reveal variations in English proficiency levels among different cities in China. Metropolitan cities like Beijing and Shanghai were ranked as Moderate Proficiency, far surpassing the English level in the rest of China.

Besides, as human capital theory and the knowledge economy pervade society, employers and employees are inclined to view language capability as a necessary asset for success. While it can be beneficial in providing impetus for economic development, the ubiquity of these discourses could hinder learners' sociocultural learning experiences (Gibb, 2008).

What valuable insights can Bildung theory offer to address the challenges that arise in Chinese adult higher language education? To explore this, the paper addresses two research questions: (1) What are the key similarities and differences between von Humboldt and Andersen's theories of Bildung? (2) In what ways can these theories inform current practices in Chinese adult language education?

Conceptual Frameworks
Bildung, a complex and elusive concept deeply rooted in European thinking, has been explored by numerous philosophers throughout history. The Greeks referred to it as Paideia, while 16th-century Protestant Pietists viewed it as encompassing religious,
spiritual, and moral growth. Thinkers like Wilhelm von Humboldt, Johann Herder, and Friedrich Schiller associated Bildung with the development of emotions and intellect. In the mid-19th century, the Danes introduced folk-bildung, which played a pivotal role in their country's industrial advancement.

The essence of Bildung is vividly demonstrated through the inception of the inaugural folk high school, which was spearheaded by educator Christen Kold. Kold's innovative methods involved captivating young rural workers with epic poems that recounted Denmark's historical triumphs, thereby promoting dialogue, inspiring curiosity, and enabling the exploration of scientific concepts and agricultural practices. By adopting this comprehensive approach, the farmhand students' intellectual, emotional, and practical abilities were nurtured and enhanced.

In the upcoming session, we will delve into the nuanced aspects of von Humboldt and Andersen's Bildung theories. While their ideas align in certain areas and can be integrated, their differing perspectives on the role of language cannot be reconciled. We will closely examine their theories in pairs.

**Universal Knowledge versus Transferable Knowledge**

Humboldt believes that individuals should have access to the world through various means, particularly formal academic knowledge (Humboldt, 1794/95). His curricular principles assign great importance to language, aesthetics, history, gymnastics, and mathematics (Figure 1) (Miyamoto, 2022).

![Figure 1. Humboldt's curricular principle: fundamental functions of human nature (Miyamoto, 2022).](image)

Andersen (2021), on the other hand, acknowledges the importance of knowledge but highlights everyday knowledge in her model, called the Bildung Rose (Figure 2). She divides knowledge into seven domains of society based on their degree of realization: what is already, possible, and ought to be realized. The central domain is power, which represents societal institutions and political power, defining the rules and framework of society.
Both agree that knowledge encompasses facts or skills that cover aesthetics and science. However, there are nuanced differences between their views. In Humboldt's opinion, the pursuit of knowledge involves the "I-world" relationship. In comparison, Andersen narrows the "world" into "society," stating that people can navigate society well and make informed decisions through mastery of those knowledge domains. Andersen is more pragmatic in this aspect.

**Relational Development Versus Non-transferable Knowledge**

While Humboldt values knowledge as a means to engage with the world, he stresses the importance of reflecting on these connections. He assumes that the self and the world is separated, thus in experiencing, this creates a permanent interplay between the individual and the world. He focuses on the unstopping process of the transaction (Humboldt, 1794/95, pp. 234–235). In contrast, Andersen focuses on the outcomes of transaction. While personal experience leads to a unique understanding beyond mere knowledge, the reflection can be in different three levels. She relates the three level of transaction outcomes to inner psychological tranquility and satisfaction, differing from Humboldt's emphasis on reflection process.

**Whole Development of Mankind Versus Expansion of Responsibility**

The third aspect of Bildung theory involves responsibility and community building. Humboldt believes that Bildung's mission is to help make democratic societies function well by promoting freedom and autonomy, for which the state's role is to provide a framework of laws and institutions that create a free environment for Bildung (Humboldt, 1854). In this free environment, individual rights should be protected and they can be encouraged to exchange ideas.

In her Circles of Belonging, Andersen highlights the expansion of individual responsibility. She believes that no matter which circle we currently belong in, the environment and we are an entire and whole entity, only a matter of expansion. Andersen emphasizes the importance of people having an inner drive to engage in civic affairs, particularly focusing on the belonging circle of "country." Both
approaches stress responsibility and community building, emphasizing different aspects of achieving it.

Language

Finally, with our focus on Bildung in the context of adult language education, it is important to examine the perspectives of Humboldt and Andersen regarding the function of language. As illustrated in Figure 1, Humboldt's curricular principle incorporates "language." As a linguistic educator, Humboldt places great value on language, as he believes it enables individuals to develop a universal perspective on their own reasoning and to critically evaluate judgments through verbal activity (cf. Humboldt, 1809, p. 220). He specifically highlights the significance of learning ancient languages like Greek and Hebrew, considering language acquisition as essential knowledge.

In contrast, in her book titled "What is Bildung," Andersen includes "language" as transferable knowledge but does not prioritize it as highly. This is partly because Andersen's definition of language is broader. According to her, language can also serve as a medium provided by aesthetics, facilitating the expression of emotions through verbal, visual, tonal, or sensory means. In essence, Andersen encourages people to explore the possibility of important aspects that may have been overlooked in her Rose of Bildung. She hints that language could be one such aspect. In today's society, numerous diverse possibilities arise, and it is impossible for any model to encompass them all. Andersen's self-evaluation and far-sightedness are evident in her approach.

In summary, our exploration of Bildung theory highlights the shared emphasis of Humboldt and Andersen on comprehensive knowledge, personal growth, and integrity and responsibility. After thoroughly examining the intricacies of the subject, this paper proposes a holistic definition of Bildung:

Bildung is the educational process through which individuals attain a deep understanding of the world they encounter, engage in continuous reflection on the relationships between themselves and the world, and progressively involve themselves in pursuits that contribute to the greater good.

Implications

Based on our conceptual outcomes, we can apply a strategy related to each characteristic of Bildung theory.

Strengthening Liberal Arts Education

This strategy aligns with the characteristic of "comprehensive knowledge." To acquire a broad range of knowledge, it is recommended to enhance the content-based teaching approach in language classrooms. Language learning should not only be the end goal but can also serve as a means to explore the world. By incorporating real content into the teaching and learning process, adult learners can delve deeper into various subjects, expanding their horizons and enriching their understanding.

Promoting Open Learning Platforms

This corresponds with the characteristic of "personal growth." To foster personal development, it is recommended that universities or cities promote open learning platforms. One example is implementing English Corner programs, where learners
can actively engage with the world and establish connections that can contribute to their moral and emotional growth. These platforms provide opportunities for learners to interact, communicate, and share experiences, fostering a sense of community and personal development in the process.

**Creating Social Language Service Posts**

This lines with the characteristics of "integrity and responsibility." To cultivate social responsibility and encourage civic engagement, universities can establish social language service posts. These posts offer adult learners opportunities to actively participate as responsible citizens and feel empowered to make a difference. For instance, at Shanghai International Studies University, students have access to programs such as the United Nations Volunteers Programme (UNV) and the China International Import Expo, enabling them to contribute to meaningful volunteer work or to facilitate international business changes. By engaging in these initiatives, learners can apply their language skills in real-world contexts, fostering a sense of responsibility and integrity in their actions.

**Investing on Online Language Courses**

Investing in online courses can play a significant role in addressing the uneven quality of language learning in China. To achieve this, it is crucial to focus on creating a wider range of courses that are accessible to learners. Furthermore, integrating blended learning, flipped classes, and technology-driven teaching methods can enhance the learning experience for adult students. By adopting these approaches, students can develop the belief that they have the flexibility to learn at their own convenience while managing their work commitments.

**Conclusions**

In conclusion, Bildung, as a timeless educational theory, holds value and relevance in the international education landscape. Its thrust principles of comprehensive knowledge, personal growth, and integrity and responsibility can be applied effectively in Chinese adult language education contexts. By embracing the essence of Bildung, policy makers, university presidents and educators can foster well-rounded individuals who can not only produce economic value but navigate the complexities of the globalized world and make meaningful contributions to society.

**Limitations**

Due to the language barrier, the understanding and dissemination of Humboldt's Bildung theory heavily relies on secondary literature. Additionally, to gain insights into Andersen's ideas, predominantly an online-published handbook is utilized. This handbook, which serves as the first of six Intellectual Outputs in the Erasmus+ project titled "Building Inclusive Lifelong learning systems by Developing a European Understanding of Bildung for the Next Generations (BILDUNG)," represents a fraction of a larger body of work. Nonetheless, this carefully chosen handbook, infused with the principles of Bildung, serves as a valuable resource for comprehending Andersen's Bildung theory.

**References**


