Action Research in Foreign Language Teaching in China

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Abstract

This paper begins by outlining the history of action research before arguing about the workability of action research in China's foreign language teaching and research. It reveals the challenges that front-line teachers in China face, such as high research pressure, heavy teaching tasks, a lack of research guidelines, and insufficient teamwork, based on a survey of 273 foreign language teachers in colleges and universities from 24 provinces (/autonomous regions/municipalities directly under the central government) in China. After that, 37 papers published in CSSCI publications about foreign language teaching between 1994 and 2018 are reviewed, and recommendations for future action research in China are offered. Finally, the action-research model of "classroom-oriented research and research-based classroom teaching" is proposed as an achievable research framework for front-line teachers, incorporating information technology, multimodal teaching materials, and curriculum and course reforms under the guidelines of pedagogy, psychology, and linguistics.

Keywords: action research, foreign language teaching in higher education, pedagogy, classroom teaching

1. The Development of Action Research in Foreign Countries

In the early 19th century, the concept of "action research" emerged from the Science in Education Movement, first introduced by J. Dewey (1910) and other scholars. The movement was influenced by progressive philosophies that advocated that learners be responsible for their learning. This idea was extended to teachers by asserting that they should take responsibility for improving their teaching behaviors (Clark, 1987). Subsequently, the concept of action research was developed by K. Lewin (1946), known as the "father of action research" (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, 2000; Elliott, 1991; Burns, 1999, 2005a, 2005b; Mills, 2003), and action research has matured as a theoretical framework and guide to action for improving education and enhancing teachers' careers.

In the 1970s, action research became popular in the United Kingdom as a training program for education majors (Burns, 1999), a period that McKernan (1987, 1988, 2008) refers to as the Teacher-as-Researcher Movement. In the late 1980s, action research began to spread in second language education (Burns, 2005a, 2005b, 2009, 2011) and gradually became more widely used (Zeichner, 1993; Hustler et al., 1986; Nunan, 1990; Ramsden & Moses, 1992; Crookes, 1993, 2005; Brew & Boud, 1995; Hattie & Marsh, 1996; Wallace, 1998; Edge, 2001). In the 1980s and 1990s, much of the literature (Argyris et al., 1985; Allwright & Bailey, 1991; Burns, 1999, 2009; Curtis, 1998; Freeman, 1998; Wallace, 1998) provided front-line teachers with practical research guidelines.

"Action" and "research" are the essence of action research: idea-in-action (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988, p. 5), research in action, and research to improve action. Hendricks (2006: 10) defines action research as Collaborative Action Research (CAR), Critical Action Research (CAR), Classroom Action Research (CAR), and Participatory Action Research (PAR). In such a mindset, action research adheres to the following guidelines:

(1) A student-based and bottom-up approach. Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) summarize action research as being performed by collaborative practitioners and designed to change things. The core motivation for action is the emphasis on individuality (Calzoni, 2002). Teaching without a fixed formula, based on individual needs, liberates teachers from traditional constraints and brings energies into play. Changes in local classroom conditions may drive adjustments in curriculum planning, regional improvements in teaching, and then overall enhancement from the bottom up.

(2) A classroom-based and beyond-classroom approach. Teachers actively undertake to solve their classroom problems (Bailey, 2001), and then curriculum improvement begins with their actions (Brown, 2012). By

implementing action research, they reflect on their teaching, experiment with innovation, and finally improve classroom teaching (Sellers, 2012). The impact of innovation starts in the classroom and extends beyond it.

(3) A problem-motivated approach. Action research helps teachers gain insight into classroom deficiencies and access solutions (Mckernan, 1987; Dutertre, 2000) and give teachers' voices a voice (Chamot, 1995).

(4) An approach based on critical reflection. Critical thinking is a primary motivation of action research (Carr & Kemmis 1986), and reflection is one of the key characteristics of self-directed teachers (Nunan, 1990). Schön (1983, p. 22) distinguishes between two concepts: "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action". "Reflection-in-action" is the process of reflecting on one's spontaneous thinking and actions in action to guide subsequent actions. By conducting action research, reflective teachers have better language teaching skills and methods (Curry, Nembhard, & Bradley, 2009).

(5) An approach based on empirical evidence and flexible strategies. Action research emphasizes empirical evidence (Christison & Bassano, 1995; Cohen & Manion, 1985; Murray, 2010) and presents flexibility in, for example, Nixon (1981), Burns (2010), Reason and Bradbury (2001), and other guideline manuals, which emphasize the flexible use of quantitative and qualitative research. Research methods are grounded on preliminary operations. For example, Nunan (1989, p. 11) states that it is designed to help teachers with no special training in research methods.

(6) An approach aiming for improvement. The purpose of action research is to eliminate deficiencies and promote strengths, and the process of action research is dynamic and systematic. The operational steps of the prototype have been variously described by scholars such as Lewin (1946), Susman (1983), Winter (1989), Allwright (1993), Ferrance (2000), Curry et al. (2009), Nelluru and Kanta (2016). The core procedure of action research is consistent. It can be mainly summarized as observing the classroom and identifying problems, reflecting on deficiencies and developing a strategy, testing the strategy and exploring in multiple cycles, analyzing the information, and evaluating the results.

(7) An approach encouraging teachers' participation and teamwork. Action research is easy to implement and does not add to the workload (Virga, 2002). It gives teachers multiple roles, transforming them from classroom technicians to decision-makers, consultants, curriculum developers, analysts, activists, and school leaders (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009), and also researchers and agents initiating improvements (Arias, 1995; Burns, 1995; Mertler, 2006). Teachers participate in classroom decision-making and curriculum development, emphasizing theory and practice (Manfra, 2009; Sarac-Suzer, 2007). In addition, action research emphasizes teamwork, and Wells and Wells (1992) propose a "community of inquiry" in which team-based action research is more reliable and effective than individual-based action research (Burns, 1998, 1999). Some scholars (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1988) even argue that only collaborative action research can be called action research.

Hogarth (2005) summarizes the advantages of action research as (1) stimulating students' interest in the subject; (2) improving students' understanding of the curriculum; (3) encouraging students' critical reflection; (4) providing teachers with up-to-date information; and (5) allowing students to become part of the research and partners in the learning and teaching process. Action research is grounded inside the walls of classrooms and elevated beyond them; it is corrected in reflections and refined in practice. However, in the late 1980s and early 1990s, skepticism about action research was also heard in the literature (e.g., Brumfit & Mitchell, 1989; Jarvis, 1981) and has remained in the literature in recent years (Dörnyei, 2007). Nevertheless, some surveys, such as Middlewood's (1999), still reflect that almost all teachers surveyed (94%) approve of action research, stating that they have learned argumentation, critical thinking, and problem-solving.

2. The Present Problems in China's Foreign Language Teaching and Research

In order to learn more about how foreign language teachers in China instruct and conduct research in colleges and universities, as well as whether they employ action research and how they do it, a questionnaire survey was used. We asked the teachers if they possessed the core skills for action research, including the ability to think critically, solve problems, and cooperate with others. We also investigated how academic institutions evaluated faculty members' performance as well as how teachers viewed standards and expectations.

A total of 273 valid questionnaires were collected, involving teachers from universities in 24 provinces (/autonomous regions/municipalities directly under the central government), who are mostly young and middle-aged teachers from China's top universities, with academic titles concentrated in associate professors or lecturers, whose final degrees are primarily master's degrees, and do not hold postgraduate supervisory or administrative positions. The data broadly outline some specific problems in the current foreign language teachers' team in China:

First, teachers, especially those employed in big cities, by prestigious colleges or universities, and without senior titles, bear most of the pressure. Teachers from various locations, colleges, and universities reported considerable variances in teaching and research pressure, but most of these foreign language teachers, especially associate professors or lecturers who were eager for career promotion, were unsatisfied with their research conditions.

Second, teaching tasks are time-consuming; nowadays, classroom-based teaching-research collaborations are far from sufficient. The reasons teachers with different titles are hampered in their research progress vary significantly, with heavy classroom teaching being the most relevant. Although front-line teachers acknowledge the value of research-based classroom instruction, there is still much potential for improvement in the teaching-research nexus. In the survey, for example, 86 (31.5% of the total) of the tested teachers stated their research was always relevant to classroom teaching, 61 (22.3% of the total) teachers said their research was not very related, and seven teachers (3% of the total) reported their research was unrelated.

Third, it's noticed that a large number of teachers lack knowledge of scientific research and methods. In our interviews involving young and middle-aged teachers in a variety of China's institutions, we found that selecting research issues was a "roadblock" to getting started, and employing research methods was a "stumbling block" to making full use of classroom data for research. The same problem was also evident in the survey, with 103 teachers (37.73% of the total) having received little or even no formal training in research methods.

Finally, teamwork and research platforms are not adequate. In the survey, 64 teachers (23.44% of the total) thought the research team's involvement was precious, while 121 teachers (44.32% of the total) thought it was more practical. In actuality, however, just 42 instructors (15.38% of the total) always participate in teamwork, and 53 teachers (19.41% of the total) sometimes did so.

In terms of teaching-research linkages, the strengths of action research can be utilized to address the challenges experienced by foreign language teachers in China. Below is a review of action research studies in foreign language teaching and research in China, which is expected to offer a wealth of suggestions for classroom reforms in the future.

3. The Use of Action Research in Foreign Language Teaching and Research in China

3.1 The Visualization Analysis of the Literature on Action Research

Action research has been introduced in China's education field since the 1980s, and its conceptual and methodological implementation can be found in the existing literature. In the CNKI (China's National Knowledge Infrastructure) database, which is the largest archive of academic literature in China, there are 1017 journal articles with the title of "action research" in the discipline of "foreign languages and literature." In terms of the overall publication trend, the annual trend in Figure 1 shows a significant increase in the relevant literature from 2006 onwards, with a peak in 2015 and a fall after 2016.
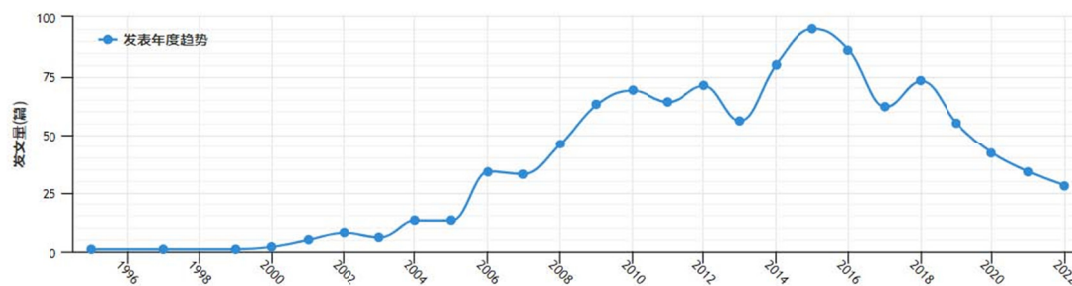

Figure 1. Annual trend of the publication of the journal articles with "action research" in the titles in the discipline of foreign languages and literature

The visualization of CNKI literature in Figure 2 shows that in addition to "action research," "action research in teaching," "university English," "application in teaching," "college English teaching," and "listening teaching" are the most common themes. The visualization of literature based on CiteSpace in Figure 3 also reveals that besides "action research" and "college English," "English language teaching," "English writing," "group work," "teaching," "English writing," and "English teachers" are also the most frequent keywords. In addition, Figure 4 shows that "reflection," "self-reflection," "teacher development," and "flipped classroom" are the keywords that

appear most frequently. These keywords also reflect the essence and purpose of action research in teaching: to monitor and improve teaching through reflection, facilitate interaction in teaching, and promote teachers' development.
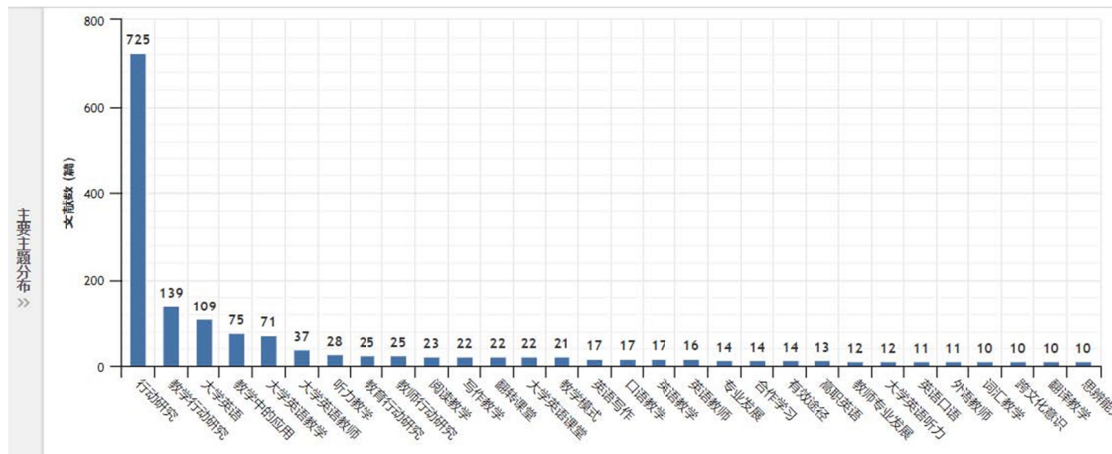

Figure 2. Topic distribution of the journal papers with "action research" in the titles in the discipline of foreign languages and literature
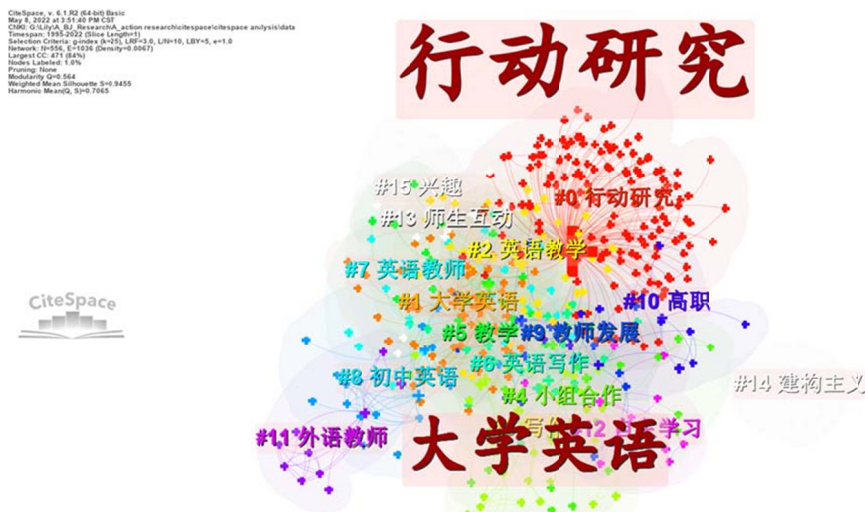

Figure 3. Keyword clustering of the journal papers with "action research" in the titles in the discipline of foreign languages and literature

Keywords	Year	Strength	Begin	End	1995 - 2022
reflection	1995	6.37	2000	2012	
Self-reflection	1995	3.87	2001	2010	
Teachers' career development	1995	3.88	2004	2009	
Flipped classroom	1995	9.93	2016	2019	

Figure 4. Top 4 keywords with the strongest citation bursts with "action research" in the titles in the discipline of foreign languages and literature

3.2 The Review of the Literature on Action Research

We chose 70 publications relating to language learning and instruction from the 1017 journal articles for further investigation. The classification in Table 1 was conducted based on the research topic. Most studies focus on literature reviews, methodological discussion, classroom reform, faculty training, team building, and university management as shown in the table.

Table 1. Classification of the previous studies according to the content of the study

Themes in the studies	Number of papers	Percentage
Literature review and methodological discussion	25	35.7%
Discussion on teaching reform, faculty training, team building, and university management	19	27.4%
Discussion on the development of students' language skills and the implementation of teaching methods	18	25.7%
Discussion on the development of cross-cultural knowledge, critical thinking skills, and learning skills	5	7 %
Discussion on the use of teaching platforms, media, and technologies	3	4.2%

37 papers published in CSSCI (Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index) journals in the discipline of foreign languages and literature (including 13 introductory papers and 24 original research papers) were further screened for a review below.

3.2.1 The Review of Introductory Studies

The introductory studies are grouped according to content as follows:

The studies in the first category involve the definition, characteristics, significance, and practice of action research. Tian Fengjun (2003) reviews action research from the perspective of teaching innovation, whereas Huang Jing (1999) introduces it from teacher development. Wu Zhenfu (2005) concentrates on three aspects of action research: pre-class surveying and communication, mid-term self-evaluation, and post-class self-observation and assessment. Using specific examples, Li Xiaoyuan and Yu Liming (2007) argue for the effectiveness of action research. Based on the 70 journal papers and dissertations involving action research on foreign language teaching published since 1980, Li Zhixue (2015) searches for the keyword "action research" in CNKI's journal papers and dissertations and introduces the specific use of action research in the research of foreign language teaching in China.

A study on integrating action research with other educational theories and learning models falls under the second category. Ding Houyin (2009) integrates action research with the problem-based learning theory. Within the context of action research, Zhi Yongbi (2010) designs the learning and teaching model.

The third category focuses on how action research is effectively carried out in foreign language pedagogy and teacher training. Wu Zongjie (1995) looks at how action research can be used in foreign language teaching. Action research courses for teacher training are introduced by Wang Qiang (2001) and Hu Qingqiu (2002).

The studies devoted to the use of action research in the context of new technologies are found in the fourth category. According to Ruan Quanyou et al. (2005), action research and related studies are the current CALL (Computer Assisted Language Teaching) research trends in China.

The final category is dedicated to the discussion on classic literature. Wen Qiufang (2011) reviews Burns (2010) and advises the development direction of action research in China.

3.2.2 The Review of Empirical Studies

The review of empirical studies is also presented below by categories:

The first category includes the studies on the development of students' language skills, such as: on reading, Zheng Min and Chen Fenglan (2000) discuss the application of action research in teaching reading to college English students, Wang Linhai and Sun Ning (2010) compare and analyzed college English students' writing on business correspondence before and after reading authentic business discourse; on speaking, Zhu Fudao (2007) demonstrates the driving role of "writing for speaking" in university English teaching, Qin Feng et al. (2013) discuss the teaching of speaking for non-English majors based on a problem-based teaching model, and Xin Tongchuan (2013) explores the development of non-English majors' ability to make presentations. Fang Zichun (2006) uses discourse pragmatics to develop English majors' macro-listening strategies, and Peng Mei (2012) proves that dictation is quite an effective teaching tool for part-time adult English majors' learning; on

translation, Wang Honglin (2015) discusses the supplementary role of the flipped classroom on English majors' interpretation teaching, and Chen Shuiping (2013) proposes to establish a market-oriented and open-project model of language teaching; On comprehensive language ability, Wang Zhiyuan (2015) investigates a new interactive model of comprehensive English classroom based on "information gap."

The second category of studies involves the research on intercultural knowledge development. For example, Chang Xiaomei and Zhao Yushan (2012) demonstrate the effectiveness of the "Cultural Knowings" teaching model in improving the intercultural awareness; Zheng Xuan and Li Mengying (2016) design a reflective intercultural teaching model; Li Hua and Li Liwen (2017) work on the establishment of an output-based teaching model with the integration of language and culture.

In the third category, some studies on the development of critical thinking and learning skills can be found: on readers' awareness and critical thinking skills, Li Liwen (2011) proposes an action plan for teaching writing to English majors; on independent learning skills, Lin Lilan (2015) demonstrates the role of teachers in the independent learning of college English learners; and on cooperative group learning, Wang Duqin (2004) suggests the use of groups for joint work in college English.

The fourth group focuses on curriculum development research. Wang Lijuan (2009) discusses the effectiveness of "learning by teaching" in college English courses. Wang Xiaojun et al. (2014) propose the establishment of a college English teaching team based on teaching management, curriculum design, and teachers' research enhancement. Wu Qing (2012) reveals the insights from "learner-centered" teaching, "learning by doing," and "scaffolding for students." Yang Xiaohua (2012) conducts an empirical study on the teaching practice of the "Cultural Translation" course for undergraduate translation majors. Li Xintao et al. (2015) develop the strategies to cultivate the reflection ability of preservice university English teachers. Li Xintao et al. (2015) propose an action research program to implement an "ecological" curriculum group for English teaching.

The fifth category is oriented toward using new teaching platforms, media, and technologies. Zhong Wei (2014) conducts a study on English teacher training courses using a hybrid teaching method of micro-groups and classrooms. Wang Xiaojun (2012) explores the construction of a "3 + 1" model (theory, strategy, technology, and course or textbook) for university foreign language courses in the computer and network era.

4. The Prospect of Action Research in Foreign Language Teaching and Research in China

Based on a survey and a review of the literature above, this study makes the following suggestions on the use of action research in foreign language teaching and research in China. First, in terms of theoretical studies, future efforts can be made in the following areas:

4.1 Strengthen the Introduction of Foreign Literature and Update the Current Studies

The focus of citation of literature is on classics, but it should also be on development. The most recent literature has always been available; however, some of China's present citations are still anchored to the literature from years ago.

4.2 Enhance Interdisciplinary Research and Foster Theoretical Development

On an isolated island in this day and age, no discipline or scholar can exist. Although action research is grounded in practice, it does not rule out the use and development of theory. The research in the fields of psychology, cognitive science, and pedagogy can broaden the interdisciplinary perspective, change the trend of more descriptive accounts and fewer theoretical studies, and increase the introduction of typical cases in practice (e.g., Li & Yu, 2007), so that it is not only conducive to theory building but also "accessible and usable" for ordinary front-line teachers.

4.3 Stress the Introduction of Research Methods

Action research has a long history, which naturally implies a wide range of study methods. The current citation literature is extensive (e.g., Tian, 2003; Huang, 1999), but the information would be more readable and instructional if it was more systematic and included operational examples of specific research procedures.

On the other hand, for empirical studies, the following are areas where future work should be focused:

4.4 Stimulate the Enthusiasm for Action Research

Although action research has a lot of momentum and potential, it is still underdeveloped in China's foreign language teaching and research. Li Zhixue (2015) makes a recent evaluation of the literature. According to it, of the 70 studies that present the output of foreign language education in China, almost all are master's degree theses, with only a few doctoral degrees dissertations and journal publications. The same observation is also

gained in my study. As Table 1 reveals, only about a third of the 70 CSSCI papers related to language learning and teaching collected from CNKI (1994–2018) are original empirical studies.

Action research is a long-term and high-invested process that requires focus on daily teaching routines, and it is hard to attain findings quickly. Foreign language teachers, in general, will be more willing to invest only when they realize the potential incentive and long-term benefits of teaching-research linkage and when management and journal publishers acknowledge and encourage it. Moreover, for example, Bell (1997), Richardson (1994), Li Xiaoyuan and Yu Liming (2007), and Huang Jing (1994) all talk about "formal research" and "practical inquiry." Classroom action research is sometimes incorrectly perceived as low-end, non-standardized, non-scientific, non-rigorous, and difficult to enter the hall of top studies, receiving a cool reception from administrators and journal editors. It will be hard for action research to develop considerably if the underlying teaching assessment system is not reformed, and the "return to the classroom" would be reduced to hollow talk.

4.5 Innovate Research Horizons in Local Contexts

Although action research is "imported", its emphasis on rootedness in individualized classrooms allows it to blossom in different lands. Action research is a research method that relies on the localization of general theories to be successful. Out of the 37 CSSCI journal papers on foreign languages examined above, only Wang Xiaojun and Lu Jianru (2014) and Wang Zhiyuan (2015) focus on using behaviorism and cognitive science in conjunction with action research, while the rest of the studies are still primarily concerned with the exploration of specific parties involved in the teaching process, with no proper contribution to the solutions to problems in local contexts. The goal of introducing a foreign theory is to both teach and inspire. The original work should be forward-thinking and theoretical, following current international developments in psychology, cognitive science, and artificial intelligence, and gradually establishing pedagogical ideas that serve the reality of Chinese education while also being universally significant.

4.6 Expand Research Topics to Serve the Needs of the Times

In terms of the selection of traditional topics, Burns (2010, p. 24) suggests starting with these areas: (1) Increasing learner autonomy; (2) Integrating language skills; (3) Focusing on language form; (4) Understanding student motivation; (5) Developing writing skills; (6) Promoting group work; (7) Making classrooms more communicative; (8) Trying out new materials; (9) Finding new ways to do an assessment; (10) Integrating technology into class activities; (11) Helping students to develop self-study techniques. The literature review in Section 3.0 shows that current research has addressed almost all topics listed above.

Future research can be a "new wine in new bottles" idea, i.e., new visions, new topics, and new findings. There are already some new topics in research that have not been touched on in traditional pedagogical research. For example, Wang Xiaojun and Lu Jianru (2014) talk about the importance of metacognition in their study of the formation of a curriculum team. At the same time, a whole-person view of a learner and a holistic view of language development should be emphasized, focusing not only on the independent development of each language skill, but also on the synergistic development of each skill, as Zhu Fudao (2007) and Peng Mei (2012) both discuss the correlation between the development of listening and that of other language skills. Some keywords that appear in international forums on language research and teaching, such as language and cognition, language identity, the influence of native language ability on foreign language learning, the assessment of foreign language competence of international talents, and foreign language teaching and learning in the era of educational informatization, should be given attention in future research.

In addition, we can follow the idea of a "new bottle of old wine," i.e., old topics, new methods, and new findings, and achieve research depth through new research methods. For example, Fang Zichun (2006) introduces discourse knowledge into the study of listening strategies. If we refer to the studies within the framework of language processing, for example, the research on an old topic may be more extended in action plans and achievements.

In terms of the introduction of new research topics, it is essential to gain insight into the characteristics of the times and focus on the needs of the country. The keywords that need to be emphasized are critical thinking skills, cultural awareness, and information technology. Regarding the cultivation of critical thinking skills and cultural awareness, the National Talent Program in China has made clear requirements for teaching college English and English majors. Furthermore, the characteristics of the information and networking era make teaching and learning mobile, arbitrary (at any time and in any location), open, interactive, and efficient. Physical space restrictions must be removed, technical convenience and network resources must be discovered, paper textbooks must be optimized, and electronic resources must be developed in tandem. Integrating these ideas, current studies on the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness include Chang Xiaomei and Zhao Yushan (2012), Zheng

Xuan and Li Mengying (2016), Yang Hua and Li Liwen (2017). The cultivation of critical thinking can be found in Li Liwen (2011). The use of technological platforms and instruments such as networks and computers can be represented by Zhong Wei (2014) and Wang Xiaojun (2012). Among these studies, the longest case study lasted nearly an academic year, while the shortest one lasted only a few class hours. A study within the framework of action research, which is dedicated to the cultivation of students' thinking and cultural consciousness, needs to be increased in terms of the number of studies, methods, and depth.

4.7 Enrich the Objects of Study and Highlight the Characteristics of Courses

In addition, we should broaden the scope of the study and emphasize the course's qualities. The representative studies in Section 3.0 involve undergraduate and graduate students in both English and non-English majors, and they essentially encompass the target population of university foreign language courses. Future research should go deeper into the features of the research subjects, particularly learning motivation and textbook development. Wang Duqin (2004), Peng Mei (2012), Lin Lilan (2015), Qin Feng et al. (2013), and others have discussed learning motivation, although specialized studies are still scarce. Teaching materials encode teaching concepts and contents. Existing research focuses on selecting instructional materials, but there is still an urgent need for action research on the development of instructional materials.

Future research should concentrate on some key features and developmental characteristics of China's foreign language education, such as teaching methods in classrooms with varying levels and large numbers of students, the development of General English to Special Purpose English, and Academic English.

4.8 Update Research Methods and Focus on Methodological Training

To keep going, we must keep up with research methods and emphasize methodological training. The methods of action research are essential and practical. Burns (2010), for example, coaches the use of means, frequencies, percentages, and standard deviations to complete data analysis in his book. The classic guidance literature on action research likewise underscores the low threshold in research methodologies. For example, an SPSS analysis was used in the publications discussed, including those by Zhu Fudao (2007), Chang Xiaomei and Zhao Yushan (2012), Peng Mei (2012), Xin Tongchuan (2013), and Lin Lilan (2015). According to my survey of 273 university lecturers from 24 Chinese provinces (municipalities or autonomous areas), 103 (37.73%) have little or no formal training in research methodology. As a result, it is not only required to encourage front-line teachers' interest in action research, but it is also necessary to "teach them to fish" and improve the guidance in classroom-based research.

Simultaneously, the methods of action research are specific and innovative. Burns' (2010, p. 83) example of the way test questions are presented shows that even minor aspects of questionnaire design are crucial when considering the study objective, clarity of information, and acceptability to respondents. In the context of Chinese language teaching and learning in higher education, more discussion of localized research methods is required; for example, research methods in large classrooms must differ from those in "fine-tuning" situations. The research methods of the current studies need to be improved.

Action research is built upon empirical evidence (Christison & Bassano, 1995; Cohen & Manion, 1985; Murray, 2010) and the flexible use of quantitative and qualitative research. Given the current state of classroom research in China, there is a greater need to emphasize qualitative research based on long-term observations, numerous interviews, etc., which contribute more positively to improving foreign language teaching. One or two questionnaire surveys are insufficient to indicate the outcomes of language teaching and learning; long-term observation records, for example, are more convincing.

4.9 Focus on the Dynamic Research Process

In the discussed literature, the dynamic cycle of teaching and research process presents meticulous research, e.g., Zhu Fudao (2007), Li Liwen (2011), Chang Xiaomei and Zhao Yushan (2012), Peng Mei (2012), and Xin Tongchuan (2013). Some action research studies, which address the need for day-to-day accumulation of language proficiency and cultural literacy, could be more informative for future research if the duration of the study could grow and the process of presentation could be more refined, e.g., Zheng Min and Chen Fenglan (2000), Fang Zichun (2006), Wang Duqin (2004), Lin Lilan (2015), Wang Lijuan (2009), Yang Xiaohua (2012), Wang Honglin (2015) could refine the teaching process and action sessions to highlight dynamic features; Wang Linhai and Sun Ning (2010), Yang Hua and Li Liwen (2017) could extend the duration of observation; Wang Zhiyuan (2015) could cite examples of interactive discourse analysis and interview transcripts. Action research is a long-term and systematic process with constant reflection and adjustment, and future studies need to present the research process more elaborately and dynamically.

4.10 Establish a Research Team and Set up a Research Scale

To ensure the breadth and usefulness of research projects, the practitioners of action research should explore the characteristics of the networking era. In this way, the barriers between regions, schools, curricula, and teachers can be broken down, and cross-regional and cross-school curriculum collaboration can be promoted. Wang Xiaojun and Lu Jianru (2014) and Wang Xiaojun and Gaoxinyan (2015), for example, investigate the growth of research teams and course groups. In the future, such studies must be bolstered because the period of lone troops is no longer viable.

4.11 Concretize Research Results

On the formalism of the class assessment system, Huang Jing (1999, p. 14) commented in this way: The listener just circles the evaluation form and rates the class as "excellent," "fair," or "poor," regardless of the course or major. The evaluation of action research findings is a crucial topic. Tests, questionnaires, and interview transcripts were primarily employed to analyze action research results in the research presented in section 2.2. First and foremost, a more objective, specific, and diversified evaluation method should be implemented in the future. Furthermore, we should fully utilize network technology to create course web pages and teaching platforms, integrate information resources, improve teaching performance, and expand cooperative benefits.

Action research may start with a change in a course and end with an improvement in an educational system. According to our survey, general faculty in universities have a sense of initiative and collective building, but their ability to make their individual opinions effective is objectively limited. The faculty in administrative positions has more opportunities and motivation to suggest improvements to institutions, and their suggestions are more likely to be accepted. As a result, we must encourage all the faculty members to conduct more solid and effective action research while also encouraging a strong sense of contributing to the progress of an educational system in a university and a region based on research findings.

5. Conclusion

This study examines the growth and benefits of action research, concluding that action research is founded on classroom teaching and research, as well as problem-driven reflection and improvements. A survey of 273 university teachers from 24 provinces (/autonomous regions/municipalities directly under the central government) in China reflects the major issues in foreign language education in China's universities, such as high research pressure, heavy teaching responsibilities, a lack of research guidelines, and insufficient teamwork, and thus suggests that the benefits of action research can provide a practical and effective way to address these issues.

This study also proposes suggestions for future work after reflecting on the development of action research in foreign language education in China by focusing on 37 papers from CSSCI journals of foreign languages taken from the CNKI Database (1994-2018), primarily (1) strengthening the introduction of foreign literature and update the current studies; (2) enhancing interdisciplinary research and foster theoretical development; (3) stressing the introduction of research methods; (4) stimulating the enthusiasm for action research; (5) innovating research horizons in local contexts; (6) expanding research topics to serve the needs of the times; (7) enriching the objects of study and highlight the characteristics of courses; (8) updating research methods and focus on methodological training; (9) focusing on the dynamic research process; (10) establishing a research team and set up a research scale; (11) concretizing the research results.

With the advent of informationization in education, the use of multimedia and the Internet has greatly activated the vitality of the classroom, making foreign language teaching cross over from the stage of "one book, one board, one mouth, one hand" to the stage of "multiple resources, multiple media, multiple modes, multiple tools." Due to the unprecedented availability of information, teachers must be very proficient in gathering, investigating, and using classroom information. It is critical to make the most of available resources, and it is feasible to establish an efficient and productive teaching and research model by using action research as a research method under the common principles of pedagogy, psychology, and linguistics.

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