

Foreign Language Teacher Education: Retrospects, Dilemma and Prospects

Yuqi Zhang

College of Foreign Languages, Northwest Normal University, Lanzhou, China

Abstract: Teacher Education dated back in the mid of 1980s (in general education), while in 1990s, the researches of teacher education in second or foreign language teaching started. The in-depth development of foreign language curriculum reform has triggered researchers to pay extensive attention to foreign language teacher education, which has entered a new period of development in China. Accordingly, it is very necessary to review the history of foreign language teacher education, discover its problems, and look forward to its future direction, with a view to providing useful references for future research on foreign language teacher education.

Keywords: Dilemma; Foreign Language Teacher Education; Prospects; Retrospects.

1. Introduction

The different understanding of teaching determines the different orientation of teacher education. Before the 1970s, the dominant behaviorist teaching view in the West regarded teaching as observable classroom behavior that could be imitated and reduced to a certain program that could be acquired through training. In the 1970s and 1980s, the cognitive psychology teaching view, especially the information processing view, held that the classroom was changing rapidly and composed of uncertain factors. Teaching is regarded as the processing process of complex information, and is no longer simply regarded as an external behavior, and its internal complexity is recognized.

Since the 1980s, people have understood the cognitive complexity of teaching from a broader perspective with interpretive and ecological views, emphasizing that teaching is a kind of understanding, which is a teacher's personal interpretation of teaching events based on his experience background and environment, and it is complicated and subtle from person to person. It is because of the deepening understanding of the essence of teaching that the study of foreign language teacher education begins to shift from "teacher training", which focuses on teaching methods and linguistic theories, to "teacher development", which focuses on teacher-oriented research. In the late 1990s, influenced by the shift of international research focus on foreign language teaching, domestic scholars gradually realized that the key to foreign language teaching lies in teachers. There have been more and more researches on teacher development, and the research fields have become more and more extensive. Such as research on the needs of foreign language teachers' professional development, research on the existing knowledge structure of foreign language teachers, research on the direction of teacher development, research on the way or model of teacher development, development of evaluation system for teacher development and so on.

2. Conceptualization of Foreign Language Teacher Education

Teacher education has evolved from "teacher training" to "teacher education" to "teacher development" in the English

literature, and some scholars believe that the change from "teacher training" to "teacher professional development" is only a change of terminology; however, more researchers believe that the different expressions indicate that people have different perceptions of the concept. Some scholars believe that the change from "teacher training" to "teacher professional development" is only a change of terminology; however, more researchers believe that the different expressions indicate people's different knowledge and understanding of the concept, and also reflect, to a certain extent, the shift of the center of gravity of research in this field and the transformation of teachers' roles.

The term "teacher training" was first used to refer to technical and craft training, which was suspected of turning teachers into pedagogues and neglected the development of teachers' cognitive structures. So the term "teacher education" began to be used, which means that teachers should not only be trained in classroom skills, but also take theoretical courses in applied linguistics, language testing and assessment, and scientific research methods, so as to enable them to understand and grasp the practical activities in the language classroom from a theoretical perspective. However, both "training" and "education" refer to the education given to foreign language teachers from the outside, ignoring the teachers' inner self-consciousness and sense of self-improvement, which is the real internal motivation for teachers' growth and development. Thus the term "teacher development" was coined to emphasize teachers' self-initiative, which means that teachers participate in the development of pedagogical theories, understand the nature of teachers' decision-making, develop critical self-awareness and self-evaluation, and actively reflect on their own teaching, observe their own classroom behavior, and evaluate their own teaching effectiveness in order to promote their own development.

While these concepts have evolved, the role of the teacher has undergone a transformation from apprenticeship, to applied science, to reflection. Teacher training is a product of the development of theories of learning and education over a certain period of time. It has certain positive significance, but it also has certain limitations, as it's difficult to acquire high-level, non-quantifiable skills and competencies related to the comprehensive quality of teachers through teacher training.

Therefore, teacher training is only a means of teacher development, not the only way out.

3. The Nature of Teacher Knowledge

In the field of general education, teacher knowledge has been a central issue in teacher education and development since the 1980s, and has been explored from two perspectives: an outside-in perspective—what knowledge base teachers need and what knowledge teacher education should provide; an inside-out perspective—what knowledge teachers actually have and what knowledge they actually use in teaching. The implicit assumption of the former view is that knowledge is produced and transmitted by expert scholars, while teachers are the recipients and consumers of knowledge, this understanding tends to view teacher knowledge as objective, directly transferable, and universally applicable. The latter view of teacher knowledge, on the other hand, goes beyond the objectivist epistemology and emphasizes the subjective, constructive and practical nature of knowledge.

In the field of foreign language teaching, there are also different views and tendencies regarding the knowledge of foreign language teachers. In general, the traditional “outside-in” view of teachers’ knowledge is still dominant, and teacher education tends to systematically teach foreign language teachers an ever-expanding and evolving body of knowledge about the language subject. The assumption of the outside-in view of teacher knowledge is that teachers can apply this theoretical knowledge to their teaching practice once they have mastered it.

However, some researchers have taken a different view of this “scientific application” model, questioning the practical utility of theoretical subject knowledge in teaching practice and teacher development. And some researchers value the role of theoretical knowledge in teacher professional development but emphasize the need to change the existing ways of presenting theoretical knowledge. While arguing for the relative importance of theoretical and practical knowledge, some researchers have drawn on Shulman’s (1986) model of categorizing teachers’ knowledge and put forward foreign language teachers’ knowledge structures models, which attempt to create more balanced knowledge structures for foreign language teachers.

4. Researches on Foreign Language Teacher Education

Teacher education (including pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher education) has a long history, but for many years, teacher education has mainly followed the tradition and based on general experience, lacking systematic theoretical and empirical research as the basis. Foreign language teacher education is no exception (Freeman, 1996). Teacher Education based on researches dated back in the mid of 1980s (in general education), while in 1990s, the researches of teacher education in second or foreign language teaching started.

Literature search shows that the number of articles on teacher education in major foreign language teaching journals was very small before the mid-1980s, and then increased, and the relevant literature increased rapidly after the mid-1990s. Modern Language Journal and TESOL Quarterly were published in 1997 and 1998 respectively in the (Foreign Language) Teacher Education Research Series. Specialized conferences on the theme of teacher education in the

international foreign language teaching community have been held on several occasions. The International Conference of Teacher Education in Second Language Teaching, held in Hong Kong for three consecutive sessions from 1991 to 1995 (chaired by Jack C. Richards), and the International Conference of Language Teacher Education, held for four consecutive sessions in Minnesota, USA, from 1999 to 2005, have been quite large and influential. The two most important International organizations for Language teachers are IATEFL (International Association of Teaching English as a Foreign Language) and TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (Speakers of Other Languages) established a specialized interest branch of teacher education in the late 1980s and early 1990s, respectively, and became the most active group with the most members.

In recent years, China has also begun to pay attention to foreign language teacher education: relevant topics have been recognized by national or provincial key scientific research projects, large-scale academic symposiums on foreign language and mathematics have keynote speeches on the topic of teacher development, and a number of doctoral dissertations on foreign language teacher education have been completed overseas or domestically, and have attracted the attention of peers at home and abroad; the first symposium on foreign language teacher education and development in China was held in Beijing in 2005.

At present, theoretical and empirical research in the field of foreign language teacher education is diversified, which is of strong revelation to the paradigm shift of foreign language teaching in China in the new era. English medium instruction (EMI) has been a hot spot and a focus of research in the field of foreign language teacher education in recent years, such as teachers’ perceptions of EMI, identity cognition, students’ feedback and acceptance of EMI, etc. Another hotspot is teacher cognition, which began in the 1990s and is still in the ascendant. In addition, teachers’ emotional labor and teacher engagement are also important turns in recent foreign language teacher education, such as quantitative and qualitative methods to study emotional labor strategies, the impact of teachers’ active engagement on students’ performance, etc. Teachers can choose appropriate strategies to regulate their emotions and plan their level of teaching engagement, and the content of teacher education programs can cover this aspect to meet the needs of teachers’ professional development.

5. Reasons for the Thriving of Foreign Language Teacher Education

The strong momentum of research on foreign language teacher education came after the boom of research on general teacher education. So, what is the origin of this research craze in teacher education?

First of all, the demand of the reality of curriculum reform. Curriculum change is an important reason for causing and deepening research on teacher education and development. As far as language teaching is concerned, the communicative approach and the student-centered curriculum orientation that emerged in the 1970s and 1980s encountered a gap and conflict with teachers’ traditional teaching concepts and methods in the process of implementation. Therefore, in the 1990s, a group of applied linguistics scholars, including well-known authors involved in curriculum development, began to rethink the traditional model of teacher training, and shifted

from theoretical and curricular research to focus on the fundamental issues of teacher education.

Secondly, the movement of teacher professionalization. The teacher professionalization movement began in the United States and became an international trend in the late 1980s. It began as a movement of teachers' trade organizations seeking to improve their professional status in society, and later evolved into a movement within the profession seeking to improve their own professional knowledge and develop professional expertise. The teacher professionalization movement has raised a number of research questions for teacher education: What is the appropriate professional knowledge for teachers? What kinds of educational experiences can be provided to enable prospective teachers to acquire this knowledge? How can teachers develop their professional expertise and become autonomous practitioners? Clearly, the questions posed by the deepening teacher professionalization movement are driving research on teacher education and development.

Thirdly, the need for reform and development of teacher education itself. Traditional teacher education (traditionally referred to as "teacher education" in China), including foreign language teacher education, has become incapable of adapting to the needs of social development with the changes in society and education, and in the United States and other Western countries, the quality and effectiveness of teacher education has repeatedly come under attack by society. People have questioned: Is the current teacher education enabling prospective teachers to acquire the knowledge and skills they deserve? Thus, the questioning of the quality of teacher education is one of the major reasons why research-based teacher education has been put on the agenda.

Fourthly, the strong influence and impetus of emerging theories. At the end of the last century, various emerging social science theories developed vigorously, and various theoretical trends of thought had a profound impact on the whole field of pedagogy. These influences, as far as teacher education is concerned, are manifested in the following: in the mid-1970s, information processing theory triggered the study of teachers' thinking process and the study of comparing expert and novice teachers; in the 1980s and 1990s, the theory of practical epistemology, the theory of personal knowledge, and the psychology of personal constructs, etc. led to the study on teachers' thinking process and the comparison of teachers with experts and novices. At the turn of the century, situational cognition theory, the Vygotsky school of sociocultural and activity theory (Vygotsky, 1978) inspired exploratory research on teacher learning, while social critical theory, hermeneutics, and postmodern thinking led to a re-examination of teachers' social roles and lifeworlds (Wu, 2005b); while the method of interpretation-phenomenology has a profound influence on the research of teacher education, which is characterized by qualitative research methods.

6. Dilemma of Foreign Language Teacher Education

First of all, the disciplinary status of foreign language teacher education and development research is still unclear. Kuhn (1962) argued that the sign of maturity in the development of a discipline is the formation of its research paradigm. The common appeal of researchers is for cohesive new concepts, categories and theoretical frameworks and relatively unified research paradigms. A common research

paradigm promotes the formation of common academic traditions, academic styles, basic views and basic methods, and helps to form a common research discourse and academic communication. Compared with other disciplines, foreign language teacher education and development is still a cross-disciplinary "field of application" (Zhang Lian, 2008), especially in China, which may lead to difficulties in attributing and defining the discipline.

Secondly, research on foreign language teacher education and development is disconnected from related practices. Research over the past 40 years has not yet provided solutions to some major issues in the practice of foreign language teacher education and development in China, and has not formed a basic consensus and theoretical system to guide practice planning and activities, such as: what is the foundation of foreign language teachers' professional knowledge in China? What are its structure and elements? How is it different from the framework or structure commonly applied abroad? If there is no basic consensus on these questions, how can plans and outlines for the education or training of domestic foreign language teachers be developed? What are the contents and standards of education and development? What kinds of institutions and educators are qualified to train foreign language teachers? What are the basic characteristics of foreign language teachers' learning and development in China? How do they differ from what has been found in foreign results? Similarly, without some basic consensus on these issues, how can foreign language teacher education and development programs be designed, organized, implemented, and evaluated? The lack of research on these basic issues clearly makes it difficult to meet the needs of foreign language teaching reform and to shoulder the burden of foreign language teaching reform.

Thirdly, the application and communication of research results are insufficient. There is a lack of sufficient communication between the researcher community and the practitioner community, and the application of research results in the practice of foreign language teacher education and development is not timely and sufficient, and even when it is applied, it lacks effective evaluation. In addition, the coherence and communication of research results within the researcher community is also insufficient, leading to repetitive research. In the case of research on foreign language teacher education and development, inadequate communication may also occur between researchers from the general education community and those from the foreign and applied linguistics community.

Fourthly, research quality and innovation awareness need to be further improved. The main problems in research quality are as follows: 1) There are not enough practical and applied researches on the basic theories in the fields where important consensus has been formed, especially the delicate interpretation and verification of some classic research results in the domestic context; 2) Important consensus has been reached on some ontology issues and domain ontology issues, but researches on phenomena, applications or related topics are complicated and chaotic, and systematic and high-quality empirical research is urgently needed to respond to these important issues; 3) Data collection means are limited, research depth and breadth are not enough, and low-quality and repetitive studies are still common. In terms of research innovation, the awareness of how to carry out epistemological and theoretical innovation based on the situation and reality of the education and development of foreign language

teachers needs to be further strengthened.

7. Prospects of Foreign Language Teacher Education

The training mode of foreign language teachers has gone through several stages from “teacher training”, “teacher education” to “teacher development”, and their training contents have also expanded from language skills, linguistics theory and pedagogy to education theory, second language acquisition theory and educational psychology theory. The content of the training has also expanded from language skills, linguistic theories and pedagogical methods to educational theories, second language acquisition theories and educational psychology theories. However, such training only enhances the theoretical knowledge of the trainee teachers, and many of them are unable to apply it to their teaching.

In this case, the direction of foreign language teachers’ development has been very clear, that is, foreign language teachers should have higher practical ability and self-development, and foreign language teachers should become reflective teachers. Through introspection and reflection on various problems of their own teaching practice, teachers internalize various theories and skills acquired externally, and formulate corresponding measures to improve and enhance the level of teaching; and in the whole process, teachers’ own professional ability is also developed. An important sign of teachers’ professional development is that the role of teachers has changed from pure knowledge transmitters to researchers, and research-oriented teachers are the direction of foreign language teachers’ professional development.

In the United States, the development of foreign language teachers as early as in the 1990s has formed a trend of policy, standardization and lifelong development under the urging of the government. Following the publication of the Standards for Foreign Language Learning in 1996, the Standards for the Teaching of Foreign Languages in 2001 put foreign language teaching on a “standardized track” and “provided teachers with dynamic development goals”. Teachers will have more room to grow; they will not only provide for the quality of their own existence through their own development, but they will improve the quality of existence of the entire nation through their effective work. Understanding and studying the trend of foreign language teacher development in the United States has a non-negligible reference role in foreseeing the general trend of foreign language teacher development in China. Xiao Jianfang points out that the development trend of

English teacher education in China in the 21st century is specialization, integration, flexibility, openness, diversity, multi-level, modernization and informatization, lifelong, standardization and legalization.

With the development of science and technology, the “pedagogical content knowledge” that teachers need to master has been upgraded to “technological pedagogical content knowledge (TPCK/TPACK)”. Teachers need to acquire basic pedagogical content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge, as well as learn to use existing e-learning tools and resources, and to keep abreast of the times and acquire new skills and techniques. Teachers should have the basic ability to use online teaching software, such as Zoom Classroom, Tencent Classroom, Nail Classroom, etc., to communicate with students online. In addition, they should be able to record videos, audios, PPTs, etc, and be able to quickly learn other new teaching technologies for sharing and disseminating curriculum resources. And teachers should have a comprehensive understanding of the content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, technological knowledge, and the effective integration of the three, and fully put the theory into practice in the classroom, including the teaching of extensive reading, intensive reading, listening, speaking, and translation.

References

- [1] Freeman, D. (1996). The unstudied problem: Research in teacher learning in language teaching. In D. Freeman & J. Richards (Eds.), *Teacher Learning in Language Teaching* (pp. 351-378) [M]. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [2] Peng, W., Zhu, X., & Zhong, M. (2008). Foreign language teacher education and development research: current situation, thinking and prospect. *Foreign Language World [J]*, (05), 38-45+83.
- [3] Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher [J]*, 5(2), 4-14.
- [4] Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes* [M]. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- [5] Wu, Z. (2008). New perspectives in researching language teaching: from teaching to the teacher. *Foreign Language Education in China [J]*, (01), 45-54+84.
- [6] Zhang, L. (2008). Research methods for foreign language teacher education: review and prospect. *Foreign Language Learning Theory and Practice [J]*, (03), 48-54.