

Original Paper

A Diachronic Study on the Cultivation of Innovative Talents in China's Foreign Language Education: Achievements and Prospects

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Abstract

It is the historical mission and sacred duty of Chinese universities to cultivate innovative talents. Researchers in the domain of foreign language education have undertaken in-depth theoretical research around the cultivation of innovative talents in the past few decades. Taking 35 academic articles published in the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) as the research sample, this study uses textual analysis to conduct a diachronic review of the generation background, concept definition, quality indicators, and educational mechanisms to discover a wealth of innovative wisdom in the academic community. However, there is a lack of research in areas such as teacher education and educational evaluation, which will require focused attention in the future.

Keywords

innovative talents, foreign language education, higher education, cultivation path, diachronic study

1. Introduction

Cultivating innovative talents is an important task and a glorious mission for Chinese foreign language education which undertakes national strategies and serves economic and social development (Lu, 2018a). Over the past decades, scholars in the field of foreign language education have conducted in-depth research on the cultivation of innovative foreign language talents, especially at the higher education level, with fruitful results. The purpose of reviewing past research is to explore the research wisdom, discover the research insufficiency, and provide references for further research in the future.

2. Research Design

This study obtained research samples from the Chinese database of CNKI using the search terms “Innovative Talents” and “Foreign Language Education” spanning from January 2001 to July 2022. 35 academic articles published in the Chinese Social Sciences Citation Index (CSSCI) were collected. The research variables were positioned in the dimensions of generation background, concept definition, quality indicators, and education mechanism. Among them, the generation background is about the social demands and academic justifications of cultivating innovative talents in higher foreign language education. The concept definition refers to the foreign language academy’s perception of innovative talents. The quality indicators involve the basic qualities that innovative talents should have. The education mechanism includes strategies for cultivating innovative talents.

The research mainly used the methods of expert consultation and text analysis. First, after determining the research topic, the research indexes were determined by expert consultation and the framework of analysis variables was established. Then, the research results were searched through the CNKI database to establish a literature database. Finally, based on the analysis of the variable framework, the research findings were sorted out, research gaps were identified, and future research areas were proposed.

3. Research Analysis

3.1 Generation Background

3.1.1 Socio-Economic and Cultural Development

In the mid-1980s, the deep economic development of China absorbed a large number of foreign enterprises, which required foreign language talents to know not only foreign languages but also professional knowledge. Foreign language education has to follow the trend and change to realize the design of curriculum objectives from simple language skills to language skills and specialized knowledge (Wang, 2005; Zheng, 2006). From an international perspective, in the 21st century, major issues have emerged in the development of the world’s political, economic and cultural fields, thus a group of sophisticated talents are urgently needed to deal with these problems creatively (Chen & Xu, 2003). The increasingly fierce competition for comprehensive national power worldwide is essentially a competition for talents, especially innovative talents (Bao, 2002; Zhuang, 2011). The globalization of the economy, the penetration and integration of world cultures and the informatization of science and technology have driven higher education to change the concept of talent cultivation to respond to the needs of the times and society (Zhang, 2015).

3.1.2 Problems of Foreign Language Education Development

At the end of the 20th century, four “incompatibilities” emerged in the development of higher foreign language education, namely, “incompatibilities in ideology, talent cultivation mode, curriculum and teaching content, and teaching management” (Xu, 2005). Specifically, the curriculum has ignored the contents of other humanities and natural sciences, and the teaching contents and materials have had a single knowledge structure and outdated contents (He, 2001). The teaching of foreign language

disciplines has emphasized skills cultivation, ignoring the teaching of relevant professional knowledge and humanistic education and downplaying the cultivation of students' ability to think, innovate, and analyze problems (He, 2001; Ju, 2008), resulting in the absence of students' critical thinking (Huang, 1998). Oral activities have strengthened students' practice of language forms rather than the cultivation of language skills (Wang, 2001). Foreign language education has become a mechanical process of teaching the answers, memorizing the answers, and testing the answers (Yang, 2008). In view of this, the higher foreign language education sector has called for the development of student's cognitive skills, thinking skills, international communication and cooperation skills, analytical and problem-solving skills, cross-cultural understanding and expression skills, so as to cultivate sophisticated foreign language professionals who can work independently and innovatively in international exchanges (Chen & Xu, 2003; Hu, 2014; Ju, 2008; Wang, 2005).

3.1.3 Educational Documents and Discipline Construction Standards

From the end of the last century to the present, relevant ministries and commissions have issued educational documents to explain the values, contents and methods of cultivating innovative talents. For example, *Some Opinions on the Reform of the Undergraduate Education for Foreign Language Disciplines in the 21st Century* point out that the cultivation of innovative ability has been the weak link in the teaching work of Chinese universities for many years, and foreign language professionals in the 21st century should have strong ability to acquire knowledge, apply knowledge, analyze problems, make independent opinions and innovate. A reform with the change of concept and mode of innovative talent cultivation has been emerging in the foreign language discipline in colleges and universities (Cai, 2009). According to the *English Teaching Syllabus for English Majors*, students in English majors in the 21st century should be trained with solid basic skills, broad knowledge, relevant professional knowledge, strong ability and high quality, among which abilities include innovation. *College English Curriculum Requirements* advocate for teachers to innovate teaching concepts, methods, and modes and to cultivate students' ability to use English comprehensively (Zhang et al., 2012). *Outline of the national program for medium and long term educational reform and development (2010-2020 years)* states that higher education should focus on cultivating students with persistent faith, good moral character, rich knowledge, and excellent skills. *China's Education Modernization 2035* claims that colleges and universities should strengthen the cultivation of innovative talents, especially top-notch innovative talents. These documents have provided policy support and theoretical bases for cultivating innovative talents in higher foreign language education.

3.2 Concept Definition

Academics have presented different perspectives on the issue of what constitutes innovative foreign language talents, which is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Definition of the Concept of Innovative Foreign Language Talents

Researchers	Concept Definition
Huang (2001)	Broad knowledge, independent thinking, strong independence, creative thinking.
Chen and Xu (2003)	The spirit of questioning, challenging authority, not following blindly, looking critically at the previous research results, thinking independently, a strong desire for knowledge, curiosity, a wide range of interests, and creative qualities.
Tang (2008)	Solid knowledge and skills in the English language and culture, a higher structure of integrated knowledge, a higher level of development of intelligence, a more distinct personality, and a strong creative ability.
Cai (2009)	Creative thinking and innovative ability to adapt to the diverse needs of society and to integrate the knowledge acquired.
Zhuang et al. (2011)	Innovative spirit, innovative ability, innovative personality, innovative results.
Wang (2013)	Adapt to the diversified needs of society, integrate and flexibly apply what students have learned, and develop comprehensively.
Lu (2018b)	Creative abilities and innovative qualities, the core of which are language skills, healthy and excellent physical and psychological qualities, good civic consciousness, moral quality, professionalism, an open international perspective and strong intercultural communication skills, etc.
Chen (2019)	Qualities - creative spirit and creative qualities; Knowledge - foreign language expertise and other professional knowledge; Abilities - foreign language skills, intercultural communication skills and creative abilities.

3.3 Quality Indicators

Scholars have proposed a three-dimensional view, a four-dimensional view and a five-dimensional view on what indicators innovative foreign language talents should have, interpreted from the perspectives of spirit, knowledge, ability, and vision (see Table 2).

Table 2. Quality Indicators of Innovative Foreign Language Talents

Composition Dimension	Indicators
	(1) Innovative spirit: seeking new and different; Innovative capability: thinking skills - agility, flexibility, criticality, originality, and multi-directionality; practical skills - communication, cooperation, learning from others, organization, decision-making, dealing

Three Dimensions	<p>with complex problems;</p> <p>Innovative personality: self-confidence, self-esteem, optimism, cheerfulness, modesty, prudence, enterprise, responsibility, perseverance (Lu, 2018b).</p> <p>(2) Innovative knowledge: professional foreign language, second foreign language, culture, encyclopedic knowledge;</p> <p>Innovative skill: socializing, practice, research, synthesis;</p> <p>Innovative character: seeking differences, non-conformity, non-stereotypical, open (Chen & Xu, 2003).</p> <p>(3) Quality: innovative spirit;</p> <p>Knowledge: foreign languages and other specialized knowledge;</p> <p>Competencies: foreign language skills, intercultural communication skills, and creative skills (Chen, 2019).</p> <p>Foreign language: good basic language skills;</p> <p>Specialty: extremely strong and comprehensive professional knowledge;</p>
Four Dimensions	<p>Innovation: creative thinking skills and practical ability to analyze and solve problems;</p> <p>Internationalization: having an international perspective, being aware of international rules, and participating in international affairs and international competition (Zhuang et al., 2011).</p> <p>(1) Possess subjective initiative; take the initiative to acquire and expand knowledge; develop academic awareness and use the target language proficiently; think independently and creatively; have own opinions (Wang, 2013).</p> <p>(2) Solid basic skills in foreign language, complete knowledge structure, excellent creative ability, broad international perspective, and outstanding intercultural communication competence (Lu, 2018b).</p>
Five Dimensions	

3.4 Education Mechanism

The innovation of educational mechanisms for the cultivation of innovative foreign language talents is the focus of research. The cultivation of innovative foreign language talents is a complex dynamic system process involving many aspects (Gui, 2015). Academics have explored the topics of curriculum setting, model innovation, textbook construction, learning environment, and teacher development in this process.

3.4.1 Curriculum Setting

Curriculum setting has a significant impact on the knowledge structure, ability development and personality growth of innovative foreign language talents. The research on curriculum setting involves

the principles of curriculum and the construction of curriculum modules.

1) Curriculum Principles

To cultivate innovative foreign language talents, curriculum design is not to add a few applied courses or strengthen a certain skill training in the original teaching plan, but to optimize and combine basic and applied, theoretical and practical, compulsory and elective courses according to the objectives and specifications of talent cultivation, to ensure the systematicity and continuity of students' learning process and the integrity and scientificity of the knowledge structure (Huang, 2010; Wang, 2005). Curriculums should be flexible, diversified, flexible, inclusive, etc., to create spaces and mechanisms that can stimulate students' creativity. Curriculum setting should take into account students' individuality and the sustainable development of their abilities. A student-centered curriculum system should be built to give students more autonomy in learning. Increasing the content of students' intercultural communication skills and cultivating students' language communication skills are also necessary (Cao, 2007; Wang et al., 2008). The curriculum system should focus on literature, linguistics, advanced translation (interpretation and translation) and intercultural studies, is oriented to disciplinary education rather than skills cultivation, and is committed to implementing humanities education, expanding disciplinary expertise, improving learning ability, thinking and research ability, and cultivating innovative ability (Zhuang et al., 2012a).

2) Course Module Construction

Scholars have proposed a three-dimensional view, a four-dimensional view and a five-dimensional view to construct foreign language course modules (see Table 3).

Table 3. Modular Course System Construction

Composition Dimension	Indicators
Three Dimensions	Language skills courses, professional courses, innovation and entrepreneurship courses (Lu, 2018b)
Five Dimensions	(1) General education courses, English professional skills courses, culture and intercultural courses, professional Orientation Courses, practice courses (Zheng, 2006) (2) General education courses, professional skills courses, cultural literacy courses, relevant professional intellectual quality courses, and intellectual and expression quality courses (Wang et al., 2008)
Six Dimensions	General education courses, innovative language skills courses, seminar language (comparison of Chinese and Western languages) theory courses, seminar cultural training courses, research-related expertise (business, management, tourism, secretarial, media, law, diplomacy, computer, etc.) courses, creative independent

practice courses (Liu & Ju, 2012)

3.4.2 Textbook Construction

Teaching materials are the carriers of teaching ideas and concepts, and advanced teaching methods and means are promoted and disseminated through them. The construction of university teaching materials needs to be integrated into primary and secondary schools (Zhuang et al., 2012b; Zhuang et al., 2013). The teaching materials should be infiltrated with international awareness, broaden students' international vision, and cultivate their cross-cultural communication skills and innovation ability. It is also necessary to keep pace with the times and introduce excellent foreign teaching materials. In accordance with the concept of innovative education of talents, the selected teaching materials should be of moderate language difficulty, and the breadth of knowledge should cover the three fields of humanities, society and natural science, so as to help students understand the framework and value of knowledge in various fields (Tang, 2008).

3.4.3 Learning Environment

The classroom and computer-based instructional models have been operated with the problem that the classroom has still used the unidirectional conduction of teacher lecture and student note-taking. This indicates a problematic language learning environment for students. In response to this phenomenon, Zhang et al. (2012) integrated guided acquisition, independent acquisition, and natural acquisition into the classroom and computer-based teaching models, and created a simulated LT acquisition environment, i.e., an "I-CARE" learning environment. C, A, R, and E refer to cooperative learning, independent learning, research learning, and experiential learning, respectively. The four modes are embodied in all aspects of in-class teaching, online independent learning, extracurricular guidance, and campus activities. In this system, learners themselves (language ability, motivation, learning style), environmental factors (campus culture, learning tasks, learning conditions), and strategy systems (management strategies, language learning strategies, and emotional strategies) interact and regulate each other to facilitate the reconstruction and development of learners' own knowledge and strategy systems. It provides students with a materialized learning environment.

3.4.4 Teaching Method

The cultivation of student-oriented innovative talents must adopt the teaching method that can give full play to students' subjective initiative (Zheng, 2006). By integrating in-class learning with after-class autonomous learning, the undergraduate tutorial system and social practice base should be established to avoid language skills and specialized knowledge staying at the knowledge transfer level (Wang, 2013; Zheng, 2006). Instead of the "cramming" method of teaching, teachers should take the teaching methods of heuristic, discussion, discovery, and research, utilize both classroom and extracurricular learning and practice activities to develop students' potential for self-innovation, and mobilize students'

enthusiasm in learning and thinking (Huang & Huang, 2013; Tang, 2008). Promoting students to conduct discovery, exploration, research and other cognitive activities can make the learning process become the process of finding, raising, analyzing, and solving problems (Wang et al., 2008). Meanwhile, educators should set up a creative learning environment for students that can develop their ability to acquire knowledge, independent thinking and innovation (He, 2008).

4. Research Deficiencies and Prospects

4.1 Research Deficiencies

Cultivating innovative talents in higher foreign language education is a grand systematic project and a dynamic interactive process of many social and educational elements. Existing studies have focused on the ontology research of innovative talents. In fact, teachers play a crucial role in the development of innovative foreign language talents and gradually promote the quality improvement of innovative talents through the implementation of educational actions such as integrating multi-modal teaching resources, adopting appropriate teaching methods, and designing and implementing hierarchical and diversified teaching activities. At the same time, the training process and effect of innovative talents need to be objectively evaluated, and the evaluation results should be fed back to universities and teachers as a scientific basis for improving talent training.

4.1.1 Teacher Development

In the relevant research literature, only 3 articles briefly discuss the problem of teacher development. However, these papers did not study teacher development on a thematic basis. Instead, they expounded on the role, accomplishment and development path of teachers in the cultivation of innovative talents in other topics, showing fragmented characteristics. For example, the influence of high-quality teachers on students is not only reflected in the guidance of disciplines, but also in the spirit of pursuing science, dedicating to science, rigorous research, and methods of thinking and researching problems (Wang et al., 2008). Teachers should have a strong sense of responsibility and mission, a strong international consciousness, a broad international vision and so on (Tang, 2008). Education authorities should intervene in teacher training, publishers should organize English teachers' lecture competitions, and teachers should strengthen communication with international counterparts (Chai, 2010). Most of these research results focus on the responsibility of teachers and ignore the reality of teachers (Wen et al., 2006). In fact, teachers' international vision, integrated thinking, and understanding of national education policies and foreign language discipline construction documents concerning innovative talents affect teachers' educational psychology and actions, which needs in-depth research (Zhong, 2006).

4.1.2 Teaching Evaluation

Among the existing research results, the research on the evaluation system of the training process and quality of innovative foreign language talents is limited to the construction of the assessment model of innovative talents' language ability and the teaching evaluation means. For example, with the help of

China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) framework, Chen (2019) took the writing ability assessment as an example to explain the application of the CSE in foreign language proficiency assessment from three aspects: teacher evaluation, learner self-assessment and external assessment. Tang (2008) believed that when cultivating students' innovative ability, it is necessary to make full use of the leverage of assessment and evaluation, combine formative evaluation with terminal evaluation, and construct a multi-level, multi-dimensional, and diversified evaluation system of comprehensive English, which not only examines students' basic language skills but also their knowledge structure, thinking ability, and personality. Besides language ability, the qualities of innovative foreign language talents should possess international vision, cooperation ability, innovation ability, critical thinking and so on. How are these qualities judged? In addition, the evaluation subject research focuses on the internal subject of universities, lacking the interventional research of the social evaluation subject.

4.2 Research Prospects

4.2.1 Expanding Research on Teacher Literacy Development

The basic characteristics of innovative foreign language talents are innovative consciousness, thinking, and ability. The question is, do foreign language teachers have these qualities? Moreover, innovative foreign language talents should have a sense of internationalization. Similarly, do foreign language teachers have a sense of internationalization? What is the current state of development of their international awareness? Are there any development problems? Furthermore, the development of high-quality foreign language talents is closely linked to teachers' scientific teaching philosophy and methods. Are the teaching philosophies of foreign language teachers highly consistent with the requirements for the cultivation of innovative foreign language talents? If there is a gap, what are the reasons for it? How can they be improved? In addition, the relevant authorities, such as the Ministry of Education, have issued a number of educational documents for the cultivation of innovative talents in higher education, but do foreign language teachers in universities understand the core content of these documents? If they do not, or even misunderstand them, what are the reasons? Do foreign language teachers' teaching, including the design of objectives, the implementation of activities, the evaluation of teaching and learning, and the creation of an environment correspond to the requirements of these documents? All these questions need to be given great attention and deeper investigation by the foreign language academic community.

4.2.2 Deepen Comprehensive Research on the Quality Evaluation System

The assessment agencies can be either universities (including teachers, students and teaching management departments) or third parties from the society, with particular attention to the assessment conclusions of the third-party assessment agencies (Shu, 2006). The assessment should include the development of the basic qualities of innovative foreign language talents, such as language ability, cooperation ability, creative consciousness, creative thinking and innovative ability, as well as the scientificity, completeness, relevance and articulation of the curriculum system, the appropriateness and internationality of the learning environment for students, the mix and foresight of the teaching model,

the comprehensiveness and innovation of the teaching methods, the international and forward-looking nature of the teaching materials, etc. The evaluation tools should combine summative and formative evaluation, particularly process evaluation, and should collect information on the development of innovative foreign language talents through the construction of teaching materials, the development of teachers' quality, teaching models, the curriculum, the teaching environment, and the educational philosophy.

5. Conclusion

The research on the cultivation of innovative foreign language talents involves both theoretical construction and practical exploration. We should not only pay attention to the reform of the internal teaching system of colleges and universities but also consider effective strategies for the integration and utilization of different social resources. We should not only carry out localization research but also learn from the practice wisdom of foreign universities with an open mind. This study expounds the wisdom of the localization theory of innovation in higher foreign language education, hoping to provide theoretical and practical references for the relevant institutions to cultivate higher-level innovative foreign language talents in the new historical period.

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