

From Professional Development to Professional Growth: The Ecological Trend of Foreign Language Teacher Education in China

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Abstract

Foreign language teacher education has undergone several stages globally, evolving from training to professional development, reflecting different development ideas and philosophies, and playing a positive role at various stages in relation to foreign language education. In recent years, as the development of foreign language teachers has begun to emphasize intrinsic factors and ecological environments of teachers, it has gradually moved towards an ecological approach. This paper traces the historical origins of teacher professional development, discusses key concepts in foreign language education, and explores the ecological orientation, connotations, and strategies for foreign language teachers transitioning from professional development to professional growth.

Keywords: Foreign language teacher education; professional development; professional growth; ecological orientation.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The world today is experiencing unprecedented changes, with shifts in global dynamics, historical contexts, and societal transformations unfolding in ways never seen and experienced before, and so is foreign language education which serve the development of human communications. In the career of foreign language education, teachers are the main implementers of the design of activities and reforms. The development of foreign language teachers' teaching abilities, the construction and accumulation of foreign language teaching knowledge, and the execution of teaching practices are critical determinants of the effectiveness of foreign language teaching. In recent decades, research related to foreign language teachers has been a hot topic in the fields of foreign language teaching, applied linguistics, and second language acquisition both domestically and internationally. In fact, ever since the 1960s, when UNESCO emphasized that teaching professionals should be regarded similarly to doctors and lawyers, and research on foreign language teacher education has rapidly developed following this initial trend, with increasing theoretical and practical studies and innovative perspectives (Freeman, 2002). For example, the focus of the professionalization of foreign language teachers has shifted in the 21st century, with greater emphasis placed on the intrinsic factors of teachers, such as their cognition, beliefs, emotions, motivation, and emotional labor., than merely on the

extrinsic requirements of language skills and teaching techniques.

Current research trends indicate that the development of foreign language teachers involves not only external pre-service training and in-service training, but also a greater focus on the support of teachers' intrinsic factors, such as whether teachers' professional beliefs, emotions, and motivations underpin in-service training and whether they can sustain teaching reforms and innovations (Borg, 2006; England, 2016). From an ecological perspective, foreign language teachers, like other ecological agents, are in a constant and continual state of change and development. As can be noticed in the reality, the cultivation of a successful teacher is not a random occurrence; it is closely related to their living and professional environment. However, despite the existing research focusing on various internal and external factors of foreign language teacher education, there is still a lack of systematic consideration regarding the overall process of foreign language teacher development and the paradigms of their growth. Few studies have examined the growth of foreign language teachers from an ecological perspective (Liu, 2020), such as the environments, patterns, and development of the intrinsic world of foreign language teachers. In light of this, this paper aims to systematically analyze the paradigm shift in foreign language teacher education research from an ecological perspective, and in

consequence, to provide new theoretical references for the development of foreign language teacher education in the new era.

2. Main Stages and Characteristics of Foreign Language Teacher Education in China

The historical origins of foreign language teachers date back quite early, with institutions like the “Siyi Pavilion” established during the Northern Wei Dynasty, which began to engage in the training of translation talents during the Song and Yuan Dynasties.

Modern foreign language education in China began with the establishment of the Tongwen Guan (School of foreign language learning in the late Qing dynasty) in 1862, marking a new era in the training of foreign language teachers. Zhang and Gao (2019) categorize the research on foreign language teacher education in China over the past 40 years into three stages based on the density of research output, and based on their findings, a general classification of foreign language teacher education research is implemented as in the following table:

Table 1: The three stages of the research of foreign language teacher education

Stages	Characteristics of different stages
First Stage (1978-1992) Absence Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> During the first 15 years of the reform and opening-up in China, research on foreign language teacher professional development was rare or nearly nonexistent compared to foreign studies, resulting in an “absence” of significant outcomes like articles or books.
Second Stage (1992-2008) Initial/Rapid Development Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Research activity began to emerge, with noticeable growth in output compared to the previous stage. More researchers started to pay attention to foreign language teacher education, leading to a gradual maturation of professional development. During this period, psychological qualities, roles, and teaching competencies of teachers gained significant attention. Topics such as “teacher professional development”, “teacher education”, “teacher training” and “career development” became ongoing hot topics, with researchers examining macro theories, policies, professional development, and teacher learning related to foreign language teachers.
Third Stage (2009-present): Rapid Development Period	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> In this stage, a substantial increase in research output occurred, with a rich diversity in research perspectives and content. More studies began to explore the internal factors affecting foreign language teacher development, such as cognition, beliefs, motivation, and emotions. This period marked a deeper inquiry into foreign language teacher education, with an increasing focus on the ecological environment of professional development.

As shown in Table 1, there are mainly three stages of the research on foreign language teacher education in China, and these stages reflect the cognitive development of the academic community regarding foreign language teacher education, aligning the orientation of foreign language education with the evolution of foreign language teaching methodologies and philosophies both domestically and internationally. An obvious characteristics is that scholars have shifted from an initial focus on teacher behaviors to the cultivation of teacher competencies, and finally to coordinating internal and external developmental factors. Importantly, the focus of foreign language teacher education in China has become richer and more comprehensive, encompassing not only external training and professional development but also the development of intrinsic factors such as teachers’ professional beliefs, cognition, motivation, and emotions. During this stage, researches have also begun to consider the ecological dimensions of foreign language teacher development, viewing teacher development as part of an ecological system, thereby promoting an ecological orientation in foreign language teacher education. Especially in recent years, more and more scholars began to probe into In a word, the three stages demonstrate the general tendency

of foreign language teacher education in China, showing roughly the characteristics of transformation from external education to the one which balanced both the external and internal development of teachers.

3. Conceptual Development of Foreign Language Teacher Education

Both internationally and domestically, foreign language teacher education has undergone cognitive and conceptual development among researchers and practitioners. Correspondingly, the trends, theories, and concepts reflect the core concepts of foreign language teacher education at each stage (Richards & Farrell, 2005; Johnson, 2006). In other words, each stage has generated key concepts, such as teacher professional development, teacher cognition, teacher belief, teacher agency, etc., that align with the developments in education, psychology, and philosophy of that period (Shulz, 2000). As a result, broadly, foreign language teacher education encompasses several key concepts, including “foreign language teacher education”, “foreign language teacher training”, “foreign language teacher professional development”, “foreign language teacher professionalization”, and “foreign language teacher professional growth”. These concepts reflect scholarly

focuses as well as educational philosophies and focal points as advocated by researchers and practitioners of the time in the areas of foreign language education and second language acquisition. Among these trends, one of the most impressive characteristics of these development is that researcher advocated a transformative shift from technique progress to whole-person development regarding foreign language teacher education.

As an overarching concept, foreign language teacher education refers to the specific education that is aimed at cultivating foreign language teachers, including both pre-service and in-service teacher education, encompassing all related factors such as teaching, learning, curriculum, and faculty (Freeman & Farrell, 2005). In a broader sense, concepts like “foreign language teacher professional development” also fall within the realm of foreign language teacher education research with special focus on professional development. Thus, foreign language teacher education can be seen as a superordinate term that encompasses various subordinate concepts related to foreign language teacher education, like “teacher development”, “teacher training”, which are also related to disciplines such as philosophy, linguistics, and general education, etc.

Historically, “foreign language teacher training” emerged earlier and refers to specialized training activities, processes, which are aimed at short-term capacity enhancement for teachers, incorporating various forms of instruction, skills development, and teaching philosophies such as lectures, workshops, discussions, and reflections. In China, “foreign language teacher training” trend and the corresponding researches mainly emerged around the 1950s, in line with the advocacy of teaching techniques at that time. Despite the limited long-term effects of such training, it remains an indispensable method in foreign language teacher education in China due to its targeted approach and quick results at that time.

With the International Labour Organization (ILO) emphasizing the enhancement of professional identity for foreign language teachers in its recommendation on the status of educators (Wang, Zhang, & Gu, 2022), the concept of foreign language teacher professionalization began to emerge, calling for foreign language teachers to be regarded as professionals similar to doctors and lawyers, with objective standards for evaluating their professional competence. From then on, foreign language teacher professional development has gained recognition in both theoretical and practical fields. This term is often simplified to “foreign language teacher development”, which generally refers to the overall growth of foreign language teachers rather than focusing on a specific role. Teacher development emphasizes long-term development orientation, aiming to enhance teachers’ understanding of teaching and personal growth in foreign language teaching. In recent years, a growing tendency found in

foreign language teacher education is that teachers’ life experience, living environment are taken into consideration, which promote foreign language teacher education to incorporate teachers’ ecology and whole-person growth.

4. Ecological Perspective on Foreign Language Teacher Growth

4.1 Ecological Perspective on Foreign Language Teacher Growth

Foreign language teacher education encompasses the entire process of cultivating, developing, and transforming teachers into outstanding professionals in a continuous and sustainable way. Teacher development or professional development focuses on the realization of teacher professionalization, considering standards of teacher professionalization, such as knowledge, skills, and beliefs. While teacher training is based on behaviorist psychology, teacher development is primarily grounded in constructivist views of knowledge, highlighting the holistic nature of teacher cultivation. However, teachers operate within an interactive construct of their work and life environments, possessing both professional and social dimensions, which inevitably influences their development. Every teacher’s professional growth occurs within a specific ecological environment; no teacher development can exist in isolation from this context. Teachers grow through their interactions with others, continually experiencing, reflecting, and improving. Unfortunately, teachers’ intrinsic values are often overshadowed by student needs, administrative directives, and professional roles, leading to a significant neglect of their personal development.

From an ecological perspective, teacher development is a journey from being novice to being competent or excellent in foreign language teaching profession, a process that cannot be achieved solely through professional development strategies but requires support from various elements of professional growth. Professional development tends to focus on the profession itself, emphasizing teaching and related events, behaviors, and activities. In the past, such kind of research mainly focused on university teachers, with only some concerned foreign language teacher professional growth in basic education (Liu, 2024). In contrast, teachers’ professional growth, viewed through an ecological lens, emphasizes the career trajectory of teachers and the environmental factors that influence their development. According to ecological theory, organisms exist within the specific ecological environments and are also contributors to these environments. In such as sense, foreign language teachers live, work and develop within an ecological system composed of personal, professional, and social elements, potentially interacting with multiple ecological spheres.

Teacher cognition and professional growth are processes that continuously adapt to the surrounding environment of work and life of the time, and recognizing the influence is essential to understanding the cognitive and developmental dynamics of foreign language teachers in China. Recently, more scholars have begun to focus on the ecological factors affecting foreign language teacher growth, such as the environmental influences of teacher professional development, individual beliefs and motivations for professional development, offering new perspectives and pathways for teacher education in the modern era in China and the world.

4.2 The Connotation of Foreign Language Teacher Growth from an Ecological Perspective

From an ecological standpoint, foreign language teachers are active agents within a specific ecological system or area, possessing both agency (the capacity to act) and objective development. Ecologically, they are supposed to assume their professional roles as school educators while also fulfilling familial and societal roles, such as being parents, spouses, children or other roles. On the one hand, in order to realize these multiple roles, teachers must act positively, in connection with many environmental factors, on the other, however, they may be affected by a number of internal and external factors, and their agency in work, life and other activities may be reduced. As a result, whether the balanced relation between foreign language teachers' life and work form the deepest foundation for their professional development. Besides, this multifaceted existence connects foreign language teachers intricately with others in their ecological system, forming a complex web of relationships.

In the first two stages of foreign language teacher education, teachers were primarily viewed as "professionals". According to this linear perspective, providing teachers with learning requirements, guidelines, training, or various professional development activities was believed to lead to their growth (Wang, Zhang, & Gu, 2022). While such in-service teacher education can yield short-term benefits, it is insufficient for teachers' long-term growth. For instance, despite established annual training goals and school-based training plans, the actual impact on teaching remains uncertain (Richards, 2005; Johnson, 2009; Jiang, 2016). Factors like teachers' self-perceptions, attitudes, willingness to take risks, and evaluations of teaching reforms significantly influence their actions. Research indicates that without adequate environmental and cultural support to activate teachers' intrinsic motivation, external training and learning may become superficial and ineffective.

In reality, a teacher may aspire to become excellent, but if their work environment is merely about getting through the day and colleagues disengage from

teaching after class, it would be an avoidable consequence that they would lack the supportive environment necessary for growth as well. As can be found in many cases at home and abroad (Gu, 2008), the development of outstanding teachers is not coincidental; rather, it relies on tangible internal and external growth factors and positive ecological relationships (Kleiman, 2013). Thus, from an ecological perspective, foreign language teacher growth should be viewed as a process influenced by the interconnected environments of teaching, family life, and social interactions. Teachers achieve professional success by balancing and adjusting their professional work, family, and social relationships. Within this framework, internal factors, particularly teachers' motivation, emotion, and the corresponding driving forces generated become crucial for teachers' development. Notably, the beliefs underlying these motivations—understandings of classroom teaching, students, teaching environments, and educational values—often exert significant influence.

Comparing the academic experiences and path of successful teachers with those who struggle to deal with merely "teaching the textbook" reveals that effective foreign language teacher development requires not only a harmonious, positive, and supportive ecological environment but also a focus on teachers' knowledge and skills, proactive actions, and a keen awareness of and adaptation to their environmental influences. To foster professional growth in foreign language teachers, educational institutions must prioritize cultural considerations and strengthen the development of internal factors, transforming external requirements into intrinsic motivations and beliefs from the external environment for growth. This shift encourages teachers to actively pursue their development and seek supportive resources.

4.3 Strategies for Foreign Language Teacher Growth from an Ecological Perspective

As ecological research gains traction in social sciences, including foreign language education and teacher education, the ecological approach to teacher growth is becoming a significant trend for the foreign language teachers' professional development. This approach plays a vital role in ensuring sustainable and effective development for teachers (Liu, 2022). Based on the fundamental principles of foreign language teacher growth and the influence of ecological factors, various stakeholders—teachers, schools, and the broader educational community—can adopt proactive strategies to create an interconnected and collaboratively constructed ecosystem for teacher development.

4.3.1 Empowering Foreign Language Teachers' Professional Growth Beliefs as the Core Driving Forces

Action originates from beliefs, and it is a precondition for language teachers' development that they must cultivate a clear and positive belief regarding

their professional development and the work of foreign language teaching itself, which may result in teachers' agency in their professional work and time allotment in professional growth (Feryok, 2012). This begins with self-identification and awareness, where teachers reflect on questions such as "Who am I?" and "What kind of development do I need?" Developing a proactive and growth-oriented professional self-concept and the relative self-identity is essential. Teachers should also enhance their planning for personal growth, motivation for professional learning, and emotional development.

Moreover, teachers need to have an objective recognition or belief of their professional growth environment from a comprehensive viewpoint, gaining sufficient ecological nourishment from their school, social, and industry contexts. Especially, when one is not familiar with what or how he or she should take actions in their professional learning, writing and other activities, he or she must have the initiatives of developing self and be guided to recognize the environment actively and act out positively. This includes leveraging the experiences of colleagues in research groups, seeking support from peers and leaders, and finally internalizing this support into their teaching beliefs and practices actively. Such internalization may create a stable and lasting motivation for foreign language teachers' professional growth.

4.3.2 Building Schools as the Primary Arena for Foreign Language Professional Growth

Teachers are essential to the quality of education (Hattie, 2008), and schools serve as the main arena for the professional growth of foreign language teachers in an explicit way, acting as the core space where teaching philosophies and practices converge. Ecologically, schools are supposed to not only implement specific training and development plans for their foreign language teachers, but also establish a long-term vision and consider ecological factors in their development strategies. In doing so, understanding the real process of foreign language teacher growth and its ecological principles is essential (Jiang, 2017). Traditionally, foreign language teachers were viewed as professionals who need training and learning as required by schools. As a matter of fact, in view of the ecological contexts of contemporary time, schools must view teachers as integral members of the ecological environment, promoting teachers internally and fostering a supportive culture through initiatives such as building a positive school atmosphere, enhancing research group cultures, and establishing supportive systems for professional growth. In such a sense, attention should be paid to the growth patterns of foreign language teachers, considering their individual needs, characteristics, and overall well-being, rather than limiting their development solely to teaching skills training through administrative order and requirement.

4.3.3 Providing Industrial Support for Foreign Language Teacher Growth from Different Sources

Schools need to develop comprehensive top-level planning for teacher professional growth, collaborating with various local industry associations and management bodies to provide necessary external support. This includes coordinating resources from educational societies, publishers, and other organizations to offer comprehensive support for teachers' professional development outside of school. Currently, with the development of artificial intelligence (AI) and the emergence of various online learning for teachers, it becomes much more convenient for teachers to carry out self-study of how to teach effectively in China. For example, regional English language associations should foster new understandings of foreign language teacher growth, addressing not only the precise needs for professional learning but also focusing on the environmental factors that contribute to teachers' development and the formation of professional growth beliefs. Establishing communities of practice, such as a network for middle school English teachers, can facilitate collaboration across schools. Utilizing platforms like WeChat (an influential social medium used in China and some parts of the world) for sharing unit designs and conducting research activities can help transcend spatial limitations, ensuring teachers receive maximum support and develop their professional beliefs.

4.3.4 Creating Effective Mechanism of Inter-Teacher Influence from Different Channels

Foreign language teachers operate their research and teaching within an ecological community that includes various interrelated circles, such as research groups, grade levels, and social networks. According to the law of ecology, interactions among group members inevitably lead to mutual influences and changes. Besides, the focus is on human action and on speech (as a form of action) that is mediated by tools and signs of the community (Zembylas, 2013), and the peer's influences is not exaggerated at any time. Therefore, building a positive, harmonious, united, and supportive ecological relationship among teachers is crucial for the development of the foreign language teaching community as a whole, which set the foundation of teacher development in the long run. It is evident in many researches that the atmosphere or the environment would be of great impact on teachers, and school leaders or education authorities should pay enough attention.

For instance, within a teaching group in a middle school or primary school, having one or more experienced and helpful peers and partners can significantly impact foreign language teachers environmentally. Seasoned teachers who are willing to share their experiences and support younger teachers can foster a culture of collective growth. On the contrary, if some colleagues always feel reluctant, passive, and speak some frustrated words around, other teachers will eventually be influenced negatively, or they may feel

pressured if they Therefore, schools should prioritize the development of cultural ecology, systems, and mechanisms within research groups and grade levels. This includes establishing roles like lead teachers and master teacher studios, creating mechanisms for sharing research findings, and reforming evaluation criteria for teaching groups to ensure that one or a few teachers can positively influence the growth of many others as a whole. By implementing these strategies, the ecological framework for foreign language teacher growth can thus be effectively developed, providing a sustainable and supportive environment for continuous professional development.

5. CONCLUSION

In the new era, foreign language education in China has entered a stage of high-quality development. To achieve this high-quality development and promote the reform of foreign language major in face of the new challenges, the professionalism of foreign language teachers is a must. Over the decades, foreign language teacher education has developed distinctive paths and models that reflect the characteristics of the times, providing strong support for the training of foreign language teachers in our country. Particularly since the 1980s, research in foreign language teacher education has rapidly advanced, significantly enhancing the capabilities of in-service foreign language teachers and making important contributions to foreign language teaching in basic education. However, the professional development of foreign language teachers encompasses not just a simple linear relationship as may be experienced by some practitioners in the reality. It is a complex dynamic activity intertwined with the ecological environment formed by the interplay of career, family, and society, creating diverse connections with different ecological circles.

Currently, in consideration of foreign language teachers' personal and professional experiences as ecological agents, to achieve long-term and sustainable effectiveness of professional development, it is essential that teacher education shift from traditional technique-oriented approach towards an ecological approach of foreign language teachers professional growth. Of course, this is not an easy task, which requires the joint efforts of governing bodies, schools, teachers, and the industry of foreign language teaching and learning, focusing on the design and intervention of teacher growth, and comprehensively considering the career characteristics, paths, beliefs, and development directions of foreign language teachers. In the meantime, attention must also be paid to the ecological principles governing foreign language teacher growth which may be varied for different teachers, encompassing both the teachers' internal preparation and reserves of personal engagement, as well as external professional training, learning, practice, and reform implemented by the authorities of the schools. This approach aims to establish measurable and evaluable growth for teachers,

ensuring coordinated promotion and sustainable professional growth for foreign language teachers.

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