

Characterizing English Language Literacy among Famous English Language Educators in China

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Abstract

The present study explores the features of English language literacy among 12 famous English language educators since the opening-up policy in China, using the narrative research approach. The purpose of this paper is to examine the characteristics of English language literacy among some famous educators in China and the influencing factors in the process of their formations of English language literacy through the analysis of the narrative texts of some foreign language educators. The findings showed that English language literacy among these famous educators is fundamental, developmental, and comprehensive. In addition, it has been found that the formation of their English language literacy is related to social, teacher, and personal factors. This study will be insightful for the cultivation of English language literacy in curriculum reform, teaching practice, and evaluation. Moreover, it will be helpful for the construction of cultivating talents based on the English language literacy, the consummation of the research of English language literacy, and the profound fusion of the talent cultivation.

Keywords: English language literacy, famous English language Educators, narrative study, teaching and learning

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Introduction

In recent years, English language literacy has attracted much interest by many international scholars, as well as the cultivation of students' English language literacy. According to *The Opinions on Deepening Curriculum Reform to Implement the Basic Tasks of Lideshuren* issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education in 2014, the standards of academic evaluation and college entrance examination should be designed based on the English language literacy of the students (Fu & Qian, 2018). The cultivation of English language literacy has become the focus of the international education reform, and Chinese educators are continually exploring the cultivation of students' English language literacy (X. Cheng, 2017). However, the studies in the field of English language literacy still lack support from empirical research. Many educators have some problems in understanding the various characteristics of English language literacy among famous English language educators, and they are not so clear about the essential factors that have some impacts on English language literacy. Therefore, this study will explore the characteristics and the influencing factors of English language literacy among the famous foreign language educators in Chinese context, by using a narrative research method. The purpose of this study is to enable us to understand the characteristics and the influencing factors of English language literacy, and thus provide some guidance for the cultivation of students' English language literacy in teaching practices from three aspects: educators and tools, educators and society, and between educators.

Literature Review

The practices of the literacy framework have been proposed and applied by a number of educators in many countries or relevant regions, as well as some educational policies. Many scholars in China have also explored the implications of literacy skills for China's educational reform (Cheng & Zhao, 2016). In order to collect the information about the English language literacy of Chinese scholars in previous studies, two keywords "English" and "language literacy" have been used to select the relevant articles in CNKI (a database of Chinese academic journals). It has been found that there have been 1,6735 articles related to these two keywords. In addition, it has shown a gradual rising tendency from 2014 to 2016, and it has become faster since 2016. The number has reached the highest point in 2019. It is clear that Chinese scholars have carried out multi-angle and in-depth research on English language literacy since 2014.

Among the studies, it has been found that Cheng and Zhao (2016)'s article is one of the influential ones in this field. Cheng and Zhao (2016) briefly discussed the definition of English language literacy, and they also introduced in detail the four aspects of the literacy of English language: language ability, cultural character, thinking quality, and learning ability. Moreover, they proposed to explore the connotation and composition of literacy of the subject of English. In addition, X. Cheng (2017) analyzed English language literacy and its relation with English Curriculum, and then he pointed out that English language literacy can be studied in four aspects of the academic standards: listening and speaking, reading, and writing. Shu (2017) pointed out the two characteristics of English language literacy should be highlighted: foreign-related and supplementary. Wang (2017) explored the relationship between English language literacy and the teaching of English reading strategies in the Chinese EFL context. Wang (2017) critically discussed the existing problems in the current teaching of English reading, and she put forward some principles, goals, and paths that could be complied with in the practices of English teaching.

Narrative method is regarded as an effective tool in the field of language education. It provides teachers an opportunity to reflect, enquire and learn from their own educational experience (Qian & Chen, 2014). In addition, this also allows us to combine the research of language literacy and narrative study. The reason is that narrative study not only provides perspectives and self-cognition from learners, but it also helps them to sort out their learning experiences and discover the meanings and connections. Thus, the construction of self-identity of language learners can be achieved (Qian & Chen, 2014).

It is true that foreign language educators are excellent foreign language learners, as well as leaders of language education with very high language literacy. Therefore, the words related to famous English language educators in China, language literacy and narrative method are the keywords in this research. However, the results of CNKI showed that the study of English language literacy on foreign language educators by using a narrative method is an area that was rarely discussed. Moreover, the analysis showed that in the current research against language literacy, most of the research still stayed at the theoretical level. It is clear that few empirical studies explored language literacy from the perspective of the foreign language educators. In addition, some appropriate targets for the instruction of literacy skills remained abstract, and it was a field that still needs to be furthered examined.

Therefore, in this article, some practical questions will be discussed regarding the characteristics of English language literacy among some famous educators in the Chinese context and the implications of their formations of English language literacy for the cultivation of language literacy in the Chinese EFL context. These problems are of great significance to the cultivation of English language literacy in the instructional practices and designs. Therefore, it is necessary to discover some educational events that famous educators experienced at different periods and their influence on the development of language literacy. In this way, we can understand the characteristics of their language literacy and the process of its formulation, which can help us understand language learning effectively (Lu & Zou, 2008).

Research Methodology

Research Questions

- (1) What are the characteristics of English language literacy from the perspective of foreign language educators?
- (2) What are the influencing factors of English language literacy from the perspective of foreign language educators?

Research Participants

Purposive sampling was used in this study to determine the research subjects. Their academic achievements, age, and gender will be included in the inclusion criteria. By the purposive sampling design, appropriate cases are more likely to be collected, and thus research resources could be used more effectively (Palinkas et al., 2015). Thus, the trustworthiness of the data will be enhanced. A sample size of 12 participants will be the aim considering the study scope and design of this research. The research subjects are the famous educators in the field of foreign language learning during the past 40 years of reform and opening-up policy in China. Twelve renowned English educators were the research subjects, including two female and ten male educators. They include Gui Shichun, known as the first person to introduce Chinese

psycholinguistics, Wen Qiufang, who has been engaged in applied linguistics for many years, Cheng Xiaotang, who has made achievements in the study of English language literacy, and Dai Weidong, Hu Zhuanglin, Yang Zijian, Shu Dingfang, Xu Guo, Zhang Delu, Liu Runqing, Zou Weicheng, Wang Qiang and so on. These famous foreign language educators have participated in all stages of the development of English subjects in China since the reform and opening-up policy in the 1980s.

Research Materials

The principles of data collection are as follows: first, objective authenticity. The selected materials are first-hand materials, mostly derived from the factual narratives of their personal experience. The second is relevance. The chosen materials are closely related to the characteristics, influencing factors, and practical significance of English language literacy. The third is innovation. Most of the chosen materials conform to the research trend in recent years with its novelty.

The data resources mainly come from the following aspects: the personal profile of famous foreign language educators from Baidu, Bing, and other search engines; narratives such as *Memoirs: Foreign Language Education Past: Memories of Professors*; related interviews, Website reports, as well as specialized academic papers. The list is shown in Table One.

Table 1. *List of selected representative texts collected*

Research subjects	Text Type
Gui Shi Chun	(1) <i>Memoirs: Memories of the Student Age</i> (1989) (2) <i>Autobiography: My Bilingual Education</i> (2004)
Cheng Xiaotang	(1) <i>Academic Papers: The Essence of English Language Literacy</i> (2016) (2) Interview: An interview with Professor Cheng Xiaotang, Dean of the School of Foreign Languages and Literature —— Beijing Normal University, about the value of English courses in promoting students' development, not just the mastery of a foreign language (2012)
Dai Wai Tung	(1) <i>Memoirs: Forty Years of Wind and Rain —— English Teaching in the Past</i> (2003) (2) Interview of Prof. Hu Zhuanglin, Peking University English Department (2007)
Hu Zhuanglin	(1) <i>Talking about English Learning</i> (2005) (2) Interview: Interview with Professor Hu Zhuanglin in the Department of English —— Peking University (2007)
Xu Guozhang	<i>Memoirs: Foreign Language Education Past: Memories of Professors</i> (1988)

Research Procedures

The research method used is category analysis of qualitative research. The steps were as follows.

First, the meaning units related to English language Literacy in the collected information will be discussed. This step aims to find specific examples and to provide authentic materials for the next step of generalization of the data. Thus, the characteristics of English language literacy can be examined from the perspective of research subjects.

Second, the units of meaning with the same attributes into the same category will be classified. For example, Shu (2017, p.40) mentioned: “*Foreign language learning is a gradual process, students’ foreign language ability varies in different stages of development. Therefore, the focus of the course should be adjusted in different stages*”. It is clear that this sentence describes the developmental characteristics of English language literacy. Thus, it is concluded as the developmental characteristics of core literacy. The aim of this step is to summarize the meaning units of the same attributes and to explore the features of English language literacy.

In addition, the relationship between the meaningful units, between the meaningful units and the categories, between the categories will be examined. Then the tendency reflected in the data will be identified. The purpose of this step is to investigate the influencing factors of English language literacy from the perspective of foreign language educators.

Results and Discussion

Characteristics of English Language Literacy from the Perspective of Foreign Language Educators

The results showed that the characteristics of English language literacy from the perspective of foreign language educators are mainly three aspects: lifelong, developmental, and comprehensive.

Characteristics of English Language Literacy: Lifelong

Literacy is an essential character that students could adapt to in their life-long development (Wang, 2017). The analysis showed that in the description of English language literacy by foreign language educators, “far-reaching” appeared once, “long-term” appeared twice, and “lifelong” appeared five times. It indicated that the nature of English language literacy is lifelong.

According to Wang (2017), early-formed reading habits and gradually developed reading abilities, can facilitate the accumulation and development of learners’ English language knowledge and thus promote their lifelong learning. It can be seen that the function of English language literacy is to support student’s lifelong development. Han and Liu (2008) also noted that foreign language (English) education, as a part of primary education, enables students to learn different cultures, cultivate their mind in perceiving the world, and lay the foundation for their lifelong development through the learning of languages”.

It can be seen that the value of English education lies in promoting the mental development of learners, shaping their character, and cultivating their thinking ability. As a result, learners can form the ability to adapt to their lifelong development, which has been regarded as the goal of language teaching (Zhang, 2016). Therefore, literacy has lifelong nature in the roles that English language literacy plays in the learners’ development.

Characteristics of English Language Literacy: developmental

English language literacy is not innate, but it needs to be generated and developed in a given situation (Shu, 2017). It was found that “development” appeared five times in their narrative description of English language literacy. The importance of literacy is highlighted as the development of English language literacy is not fixed and static. Zou noted his view in Chang’s study (2010), students are likely to learn a language in a dead, fixed, and static way at

the beginning. Thus, it is related to the actual language knowledge rather than language ability. In other words, learners cannot cultivate language ability from fixed and static learning, which is not related to literacy. It indicates that English language literacy is developmental and dynamic, instead of being fixed and static.

By interpreting the process of foreign language learning, Shu (2017) introduced that foreign language learning is a gradual process, and students' ability may vary in different stages of their development. Therefore, course's goal should also have different emphasis at different stages. It can be seen that English language literacy always shows certain features in different educational stages. Moreover, any stage will not be the end of the cultivation of English language literacy (Shu, 2017).

As Niu and Liu (2015) claimed that the geographical literacy has the characteristics of developmental. Similarly, the cultivation of English language literacy is also an accumulating process that the English ability can be improved gradually. In other words, the cultivation of English language literacy is a long-term task and a gradual developmental process.

Characteristics of English Language Literacy: comprehensive

The analysis showed that many famous foreign language educators often use the words "comprehensive" and "all-round" when talking about English language literacy. It indicated that English language literacy is a comprehensive embodiment of knowledge, ability, and attitude. According to Shu (2017), Curriculum Standard points out that English language literacy covers many aspects, including knowledge and skills, process and method, emotional attitude, and values education. The result is that an integral relationship between them can be formed as they penetrate and interact with each other (Shu 2017).

Therefore, the connotation of English language literacy is not simple, as well as the formation of language literacy. The formation of language literacy cannot be detached from the support of knowledge, ability, attitude, emotion, values of the learners. However, if knowledge, ability, attitude, and value are isolated, then the formation of English language literacy will not be possible. Thus, connections between them can be helpful for the construction of English language literacy.

It is clear that comprehensiveness is one of the characteristics of English language literacy due to the synthetic tendency of curriculum reform (S. Cheng, 2017). Therefore, each of them is required to respond to the English language literacy, as well as the comprehensive characteristics of the literacy (S. Cheng, 2017).

Influencing Factors of English Language Literacy from the Perspective of Famous Foreign Language Educators

According to fields' classification, the influencing factors of English language literacy can be divided into three aspects: the factors between people, between people and society, and between people and tools. First, the elements between people refer to the influence from students, teachers, and parents. Secondly, the elements between people and society refer to many influencing factors influenced by social development. Finally, the elements between people and tools refer to the factors formed by people impacted by tools.

Between people: Influenced by Self and Educators

The analysis showed that “self”, “autonomy”, and “teacher guidance” have appeared many times in the relevant texts of famous foreign language educators. It can be seen that teacher guidance and learner autonomy are necessary in the formation and development of English language literacy. The development of English language literacy is influenced by the learners themselves and the teachers who play an essential role in their learning process (Wang, 2017).

Learners’ autonomy is regarded as a primary factor in the development of English language literacy. It was also highlighted in the discussion of Wen (1995) that learning theory has a direct impact on learners’ learning behavior in the last two decades. Learners’ attitudes and ideas are closely related to learners’ language learning behavior (Wen, 1995). Moreover, teachers play a guiding role in the formation of English language literacy. It is in accordance with the view of Wen in Xu and Shi’s study (2018), which claimed that teachers are required to understand the relationship between English language literacy and other factors influencing teaching. Thus, they could properly implement it in their teaching process. In other words, students’ awareness of cross-culture could be raised, and their effective learning strategies could be enhanced by teachers’ instruction in the class. English language literacy plays a fundamental role in the teaching practices (Wang, 2016).

Human and Society: Influenced by Language Environment and Society

The analysis showed that many foreign language educators indicate that foreign language education is primarily influenced by social factors. The development of English language literacy results from the social studies by many scholars in foreign language education. Therefore, the development of English language literacy is also affected by many social factors (X. Cheng & Zhao, 2016). Dai (2003) pointed out that foreign language education cannot be separate from society, and it is a crucial base for the needs of society. Thus, in the process of language teaching, the reform of language teaching should consider the social needs (Gui, 2004).

Nowadays, literacy plays a guiding role in the process of discovering creative practices in practical teaching (Zhong, 2016). The primary purpose of education is to meet the needs of society, politics, economy, and culture (Gui, 2004). The secondary purpose is to reflect some changes in educational and teaching concepts, and in the development of students. The importance of innovation, creativity, international vision, communication and interaction, teamwork, social contribution, self-planning, and management literacy, is emphasized in the formation of English language literacy. It is consistent with Shu’s view (2013) that foreign language education is required to serve the developmental and long-term goals of the society. The cultivation of students’ creative ability, critical thinking ability, communication and cooperation ability, and social responsibility are also the challenges in the stage of primary education in China. Therefore, the reform of language teaching and language learning should conform to the social needs (Gui, 2004).

Between People and Tools: Learning Medium

Tools refer to the learning medium and the resources used by the subjects in the process of learning English, such as books, references, or other information. Text analysis showed that foreign language educators have repeatedly stressed the importance of tools in language learning.

Gui (1989) noted that English is helpful for his literacy development through reading progressive literature and art. Similarly, Xu stated in Li and Liu's study (1988) that the benefit of reading is to develop the habit of self-study skills, and it was enlightening for future learning. Dai (2003) also claimed that taking advantage of the opportunity to learn is helpful, and it may be helpful for the understanding of the new tendency of linguistic development internationally. The result showed that the cultivation of language skills is supported by many books and reading experience.

The function of tools is gradually developed in language use (S. Cheng, 2017). In other words, the potential of tools can be generated when people learn language actively. Therefore, the use of tools can facilitate learners' language ability, and it can be helpful for the development of language literacy (Shu, 2017).

Conclusion

This study investigated English language literacy from the perspective of foreign language educators through the narrative analysis of the texts. The aim of this study is to explore the characteristics and the influencing factors of the English language literacy among the famous foreign language educators in China. It was found that English language literacy in the eyes of foreign language educators is lifelong, developmental, and comprehensive. The influencing factors of English language literacy are threefold: people, society, and tools. English language literacy is influenced by society, learners themselves, educators, and the learning medium.

According to the results and the actual situation, the suggested recommendations are from curriculum reform, teaching practice, and educational evaluation. The formation of English language literacy is determined by various complex factors. The Ministry of Education put forward the implementation in educational practices: first, to implement language literacy through curriculum reform. The educational objectives should be examined based on the cultivation of language literacy, and thus the connection of the curriculums could be enhanced. Second, the implementation of English language literacy derives from the teaching practices. Third, the implementation of English language literacy can rely on educational evaluation. The development of students' English language literacy is an essential basis in the evaluation of the quality of education (X. Cheng, 2017). Thus, standards of each subject can be established in the process of the cultivation of English language literacy.

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