



The Development of Educational Linguistics from 1972 to 2022

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Abstract. 2022 is the 50th anniversary of the birth of educational linguistics. American linguist Spolsky first proposed educational linguistics in 1972, which gradually developed into an independent new discipline with a “transdisciplinary” research paradigm. This paper systematically reviews the development of western educational linguistics from five aspects: subject definition, subject development, research methods, research scope and research trends, briefly introduces its current situation in China, and at the same time puts forward new thoughts on the prospects of educational linguistics and language teaching with Chinese characteristics, hoping that scholars could have a more comprehensive understanding of this brand-new field.

Keywords: educational linguistics · transdisciplinary · language teaching

1 Introduction

The term “educational linguistics” was first proposed by Bernard Spolsky, a linguistics professor at New Mexico State University in the United States, at the Third Conference on Applied Linguistics held in Copenhagen, Denmark, in 1972. Language education is generally regarded as a part of applied linguistics, and the concept of educational linguistics originated from Spolsky’s dissatisfaction with the nature and scope of applied linguistics [1]. In a broad sense, the research topic of applied linguistics is too general to focus on the exploration of language and education; in a narrow sense, applied linguistics only refers to the application of linguistics in foreign language teaching, without considering other issues such as language education policy making, let alone integrating other related disciplines such as psychology and sociology into research. Based on the “identity crisis” of applied linguistics, the rise of educational linguistics is beneficial to the development of language education. This paper aims to provide new thoughts on the prospects of educational linguistics and language teaching in China by summarizing the general situation of educational linguistics at home and abroad.

2 A Review of the Development of Educational Linguistics Abroad

2.1 Subject Definition

Many scholars have tried to clarify the definition of educational linguistics. Spolsky thinks educational linguistics is an interdisciplinary subject covering both linguistics

and pedagogy, similar to educational psychology and educational sociology [2]. Crystal puts forward that educational linguistics uses linguistic theories and methods to study the teaching of the mother tongue, including spoken and written forms, in all teaching situations [3]. Cooper and Richard agree with Spolsky that educational linguistics is a branch of applied linguistics, including language policy planning, first and second language acquisition, reading and writing ability, and language assessment [4, 5]. Hult believes that educational linguistics can solve practical problems in education with multidisciplinary research models.

To sum up, educational linguistics can include all subjects related to language teaching. It is a brand-new field with education as the carrier and language as the teaching object.

2.2 Subject Development

There are three main schools of educational linguistics: American Schools, British Schools and Australian schools. Their thoughts have similarities and differences, reflecting the unique disciplinary characteristics of educational linguistics.

American School, represented by Spolsky, has a wide range of research fields. Spolsky discusses the definition and research scope of educational linguistics and advocates starting with the specific problems in language education (problem-oriented) and combining the research methods of other disciplines, like sociology, to study language teaching and planning [6]. Hymes, Hornberger, Pica, Butler and Hult in the School of Education, University of Pennsylvania, also greatly contribute to educational linguistics development. British School, represented by Stubbs, insists on the basic position of linguistics and holds that language teaching and curriculum design should be carried out under the guidance of linguistic theory. Stubbs, Trousdale, Walter, and Bell are the representatives of this school. Australian school, represented by Halliday, takes systemic functional linguistics as a foothold and holds that language research should focus on meaning. The representative figures of this school are Halliday, J. R. Martin, F. Christie, J. Rothery, and D. Rose. Halliday explains educational linguistics theoretically and puts forward a “transdisciplinary” research paradigm, strikingly similar to Spolsky’s “problem-oriented” pattern. It is theme-oriented, which advocates that the research in educational linguistics should break through the boundaries of disciplines and learn from the theories, analytical tools and research results of various disciplines, including sociology, psychology, anthropology, and literature, to integrate multiple disciplines innovatively [7].

2.3 Research Methods

Because of the transdisciplinary nature and the complexity and diversity of language, there are three main research methods in educational linguistics: (1) Quantitative research method based on data materials. Quantitative research includes observation, experiment, investigation, and content analysis, mainly driven by data collection and analysis. (2) Qualitative research method based on the interview, observation and other materials. Qualitative research includes case studies and ethnographic surveys. For example, educational linguistics can collect data through ethnographic methods and conduct discourse

analysis with language analysis techniques. (3) Non-material Research, including the narration, interpretation and application of the theory, and the summary of personal views.

Generally, there is no single and specific research method in educational linguistics. Researchers should constantly supplement their knowledge and seek diversified methods suitable for problem-solving based on specific problems.

2.4 Research Scope

Educational linguistics is a subject that studies “language in education” and “language-related education”. Spolsky first proposes that educational linguistics should investigate second language acquisition and language teaching and then brings language barriers, language policy research, and the relationship between language, family, school and society into the research scope of educational linguistics [8].

Based on the current research, the research scope of educational linguistics can be divided into six categories: language and cultural education, language policy and management, the cultivation of literacy, foreign language and second language acquisition, language testing and evaluation, language ecology and education.

With the development of science, technology and globalization, the research scope of educational linguistics continuously expands, and its boundaries show openness and integration. However, this also reminds researchers to pay attention to boundary issues, avoiding turning educational linguistics into a super-universal discipline.

2.5 Research Trends

With the popularity of computer technology and the Internet, the emergence of multilingual education and the study of cultural pluralism, the frontier research of educational linguistics abroad involves three major fields: (1) The application of network technology. In the era of big data sharing, the promotion of MOOCs and digital games (such as MMOGs and SIEs) greatly changes the language learning mode and efficiency. (2) Bilingual deaf education. Scholars in educational linguistics still lack an understanding of sign language usage patterns and evaluation techniques. (3) Multicultural language education. Cross-cultural communication barriers, racial superiority and post-colonialism still affect language education, resulting in many cultural, social and national identity problems.

In conclusion, western educational linguistics has made remarkable achievements in 50 years. As a new subject, it has a rich subject connotation, solid theoretical foundation and extensive research fields, which embodies great application prospects and practical significance.

3 A Review of the Development of Educational Linguistics in China

Chinese linguists have always disputed the subject characteristics of foreign language education, so the theory about educational linguistics was introduced. Compared with

western countries, educational linguistics in China is still in its infancy, but there are also some academic achievements.

Since Zhang expounded the definition of educational linguistics in 1987, educational linguistics has become a topic in the foreign language circle in China in the 1990s [9]. Zhong proposes that educational linguistics covers language teaching. Zhang thinks it is the general trend to construct educational linguistics with Chinese characteristics [10]. Educational linguistics relates to many disciplines, and applying linguistic theories to foreign language teaching helps establish and improve the language teaching system in China. Although the expressions are slightly different, scholars in the 20th century agree that educational linguistics can promote language teaching research in China.

Since the 21st century, the research of various disciplines has matured, and educational linguistics has developed rapidly in China. Some scholars put forward the idea of constructing educational linguistics as a new discipline in China [11]. Because many domestic scholars are not familiar with the concept of educational linguistics, it is necessary to introduce its origin, development and prospect. Yu and Yuan expound that educational linguistics was inseparable from second language acquisition research [12]. Shen also emphasizes the problem-oriented and transdisciplinary characteristics of educational linguistics [13]. In addition, some scholars review the major schools and discipline orientations of educational linguistics, while Yu and Yan, taking Spolsky and Hornberger as representatives, introduce the rise of educational linguistics in detail and put forward the prospects of foreign language education in China [14]. These introductory academic achievements all lay the foundation for the further development of educational linguistics in China.

In recent years, the increase of review papers of the annual meeting also reflects the prosperity and sinicization of educational linguistics, while the foundation of the China Educational Linguistics Research Association in 2010 marks the maturity of the sinicization of educational linguistics. The Round Table of China Educational Linguistics Academic Forum 2012 indicates that China's educational linguistics has embarked on a new road of independent development. Nancy Hornberger was also invited to attend this conference. At the 6th Annual Meeting of the Educational Linguistics Research Association held in April 2015, scholars discussed topics such as foreign language education policy reform, teaching model research and foreign language talent training, which reflected the rooting, sprouting and vigorous growth of educational linguistics in China.

Under the background of China's educational reform and innovation, the disciplinary characteristics, research scope and paradigms of educational linguistics are of great reference significance. Since 2020, bibliometrics analysis has been applied in the research on educational linguistics. In addition, under the guidance of "curriculum ideological and political education", besides language policies and bilingual learning problems, some scholars began to study ideological and political education in educational linguistics [15].

To sum up, the research on educational linguistics in China has developed rapidly. Presently, theories of educational linguistics are generally introduced from abroad, so there is still a broad space for exploring its integration with China's national conditions, which can promote the progress of language education in China.

4 Enlightenment

Educational linguistics is problem-oriented and transdisciplinary based on educational practice. China is in a period of foreign language education reform, and the direction of foreign language teaching is closely related to the development of politics and the economy in China. The Chinese government has put forward the idea of “building a community with a shared future for mankind” and “the belt and road initiative”, and the Ministry of Education has also proposed the requirements of “new liberal arts and grand foreign languages”, all of which should serve as the guiding ideology for foreign language teaching and educational linguistics. Based on the above, some new thoughts on the development of educational linguistics in China are proposed.

4.1 Clarify the Subject Characteristic and Deepen the Reform of Foreign Language Teaching

The transdisciplinary nature of educational linguistics emphasizes viewing problems from a holistic and systematic perspective. English education is coherent rather than fragmented in the whole educational process, so researchers should consider the connection between different stages of English education. At the same time, the transdisciplinary nature challenges the researchers’ diversified knowledge. At present, because of the simple subject background knowledge of researchers in China, the establishment and collaboration of multidisciplinary teams are conducive to integrating disciplinary knowledge and reforming English language education.

4.2 Integrate the Research Paradigm and Strengthen Language Education Research

With the maturity of educational linguistics theory, four influential research paradigms have gradually formed: the paradigm based on language teaching, the paradigm based on sociolinguistics, the paradigm based on general linguistics and the paradigm based on hermeneutics. The emergence of the four research paradigms shows that educational linguistics covers the whole teaching process, including language teaching. However, the current development of educational linguistics in China only focuses on language teaching research, rarely involving the other three paradigms. Although these four research paradigms are different in theoretical basis, research methods and groups, they all pay attention to the interaction between language and education. Thus, we should comprehensively consider individual development and training, social and cultural inheritance and national strategic planning. The research of educational linguistics should take into account three levels: micro (teaching quality), meso (language education of various languages) and macro (national language education policy and planning), and strengthen the research on the role of social factors such as social structure and cultural background in language teaching.

4.3 Broaden the Research Field and Conform to the Trend of Language Education

For the research of educational linguistics in China, researchers should attach great importance to the awareness of social responsibility and frontier, besides the awareness of problem, holism and pluralism. In the new era of educational reform, in addition to traditional research fields like second language acquisition and foreign language teaching, other areas such as language services, Chinese international education and foreign language ecological teaching view should become the focus of educational linguistics research in China. Domestic researchers should avoid the blind introduction of foreign theories, increase the exchange of academic achievements, actively participate in the construction of an international educational linguistics theoretical system, and integrate educational linguistics concepts with Chinese characteristics (e.g., school-based construction) into theoretical research to facilitate Chinese culture to “go global”.

5 Conclusion

Educational linguistics takes language education as its core, educational practice as its starting point and solving practical problems in education as its guide, showing a pluralistic development trend. As a new discipline with a “transdisciplinary” research paradigm, educational linguistics research combines the theoretical systems and analytical tools of various disciplines (e.g., sociology, literature, psychology, anthropology). It comprehensively explores language teaching and learning, which conforms to the current interdisciplinary research trend and has broad prospects. After more than 30 years of development, educational linguistics in China has begun to take shape, gradually forming a theoretical system of educational linguistics with Chinese characteristics. Educational linguistics is significant to the reform and development of foreign language education in China, which deserves researchers’ attention and further exploration.

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