

A Review of Studies on Multimodal Foreign Language Teaching in China — A Statistical Analysis Based on the Papers Published in the Chinese Core Linguistic Journals

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Abstract

Based on studies of the definition, origin and domestic and international development of multimodal foreign language teaching, this paper gives a statistical analysis of the research papers on multimodal foreign language teaching in China published from 2014 to 2024 in domestic core linguistic journals. The results show that the number of publications has increased overall, with non-empirical studies dominating. Research content includes macro-level studies on teaching models as well as micro-level studies on listening and speaking skills. Integration with emerging technologies has also emerged as a new trend. The study summarizes the current status and shortcomings of multimodal foreign language teaching research in China and offers suggestions for future directions.

Keywords

Multimodal; Foreign language teaching; Chinese core linguistic journals; Statistical analysis; Review

1. Introduction

In recent years, the field of English Language Teaching (ELT) has increasingly recognized the importance of integrating various modes of communication to enhance language learning. The multimodal foreign language teaching, which incorporates several communication modalities such as text, visual, aural, spatial, and kinesthetic elements, is increasingly supporting and transforming traditional ways of ELT (Bisson et al., 2015; Ho & Tai, 2020). Based on the social semiotics of systemic functional linguistics, multimodal foreign language teaching integrates multiple symbolic resources and means in the teaching design to present richer and more interactive content, thereby enhancing teaching effectiveness and students'

comprehensive language abilities. In recent years, this teaching model has garnered significant international attention and application. Western scholars initiated research on the application of multimodal discourse in teaching over several decades ago and have since developed a relatively mature theoretical framework and practical pathways. In China, with the in-depth study of systemic functional linguistics and the rise of multimodal discourse analysis, research on multimodal foreign language teaching has gradually become a hot topic in the field of foreign language education. Nowadays, domestic scholars have also made notable progress in this area. To further clarify the current status and development trends of multimodal foreign language teaching research in China and to identify future research directions, this study takes research papers on multimodal foreign language teaching published in 17 core foreign language journals from 2014 to 2024 as the main research objects. Through statistical analysis and literature review, this study aims to provide references and suggestions for the future development of multimodal foreign language teaching research in China.

2. Research Methods

This study employs bibliometric analysis, comparative research, and theoretical analysis. Based on the “2023 Edition of Peking University’s Core Journal Catalogue,” 17 core foreign language journals were selected for this study. These journals were chosen because core foreign language journals, to a certain extent, represent the development direction of the field and possess authority and leadership in the discipline. Using CNKI, the journal names were entered, and “multimodal,” “teaching” were used as keywords, abstract search terms, and full-text search terms in the “Academic Journal Database” to retrieve all relevant papers, yielding a total of 144 articles. By reviewing the abstracts of these 144 papers, papers strongly related to “multimodal teaching” were further gathered, resulting in 74 papers that form the main research objects of this study. The 74 papers were downloaded to construct the corpus for this study and imported into Notion, an app, to establish a database. The papers were re-coded based on publication year, author, title, journal name, research method, research field, research content, and research object, followed by further statistical analysis.

3. Data Analysis

3.1. Analysis of Annual Publications

The 74 papers were statistically analyzed based on their publication years, and a line chart was created. The results are shown in Figure 1.

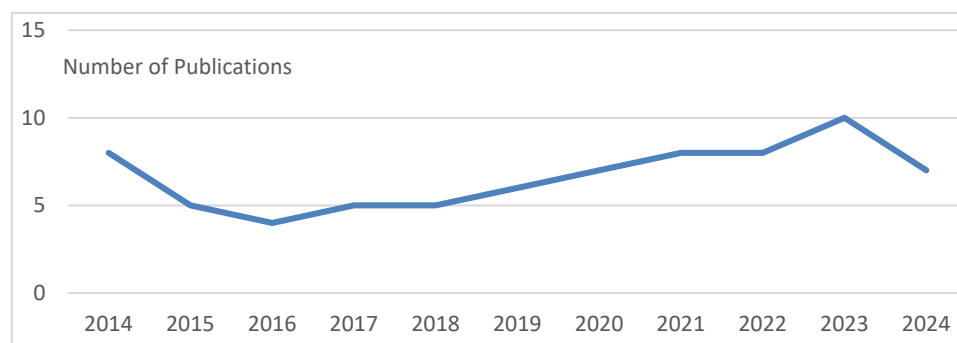


Figure 1

Figure 1 shows that from 2014 to 2024, the number of publications on the application of multimodality in foreign language teaching generally followed a trend of fluctuating upward. In 2014, there were 8 publications, which then decreased to 5 in 2015 and 4 in 2016, indicating some volatility. From 2017 to 2019, the number of publications remained stable at 5 to 6 per year. Starting in 2020, the number began to rise to 7, further increasing to 8 in both 2021 and 2022, and reaching a peak of 10 in 2023. In 2024, it dropped back to 8. This trend indicates that after an initial period of fluctuation, research on multimodality in foreign language teaching has gradually stabilized and shown a growing momentum in recent years. The peak of 10 publications in 2023 reflects increased research activity and attention in this field. However, the decline in 2024 may suggest that the research has entered a new adjustment phase. Overall, however, multimodality in foreign language teaching continues to attract significant attention from the academic scholars.

3.2. Analysis of Research Method Classification

According to Liu Runqing's (Liu, 1998:1-3) classification of research methods in educational and foreign language teaching research, and based on the statistical analysis of research methods in multimodal foreign language teaching papers from 2014 to 2024, this study categorizes the research methods in multimodal foreign language teaching into two major types: empirical research and non-empirical research.

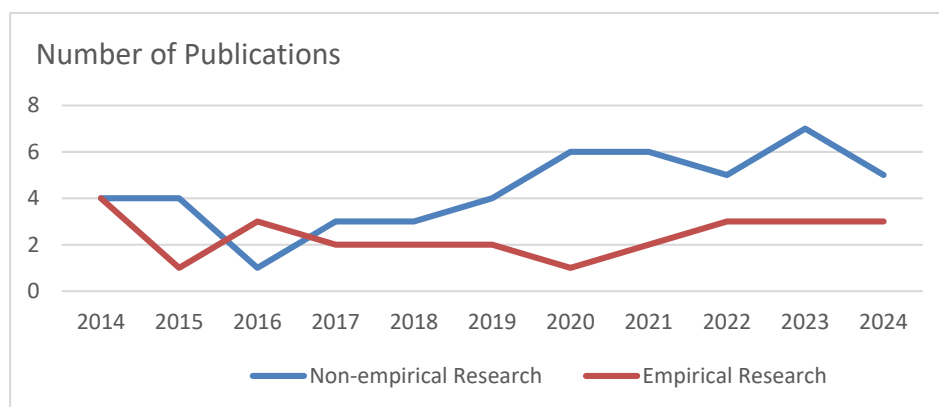


Figure 2. According to Figure 2 (Statistics of Domestic Research Methods in Multimodal Foreign Language Teaching from 2014 to 2024), there were a total of 48 non-empirical research papers from 2014 to 2024, accounting for 64.9% of the total number of papers on multimodal foreign language teaching. In contrast, empirical research papers numbered 26, representing 35.1% of the total. The proportion of non-empirical research significantly outweighed that of empirical research in the field of multimodal foreign language teaching.

3.3. Thematic Domains of Multimodal Foreign Language Teaching Research

Based on the statistical analysis of publications on multimodal foreign language teaching in China from 2014 to 2024, the thematic domains of multimodal teaching research are relatively extensive, covering various aspects of foreign language teaching, including listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. The statistical results are shown in Figure 3.

Drawing on Liao Chuanfeng's (Liao, 2011: 58) classification of applied research, applied research can be divided into macro-level research and micro-level research. Macro-level research refers to the study of the necessity, possibility, and feasibility of applying a particular theory to a specific field of practice. Micro-level research, on the other hand, primarily focuses on the operational methods of applying a particular theory in a specific field of practice. According to the statistical data, from 2014 to 2024, research on multimodal foreign language teaching has mainly focused on macro-level aspects such as pedagogical models (25.68%) and theoretical analysis (17.57%), as well as micro-level aspects such as listening & speaking abilities (17.57%). In addition, micro-level research on vocabulary, textbooks and translation also accounted for a certain proportion (5.41% and 2.7%, respectively). This indicates that in the field of multimodal foreign language teaching, both macro-level and micro-level research have received attention, with listening & speaking abilities being one of the key focuses.

3.3.1. Macro-level Research

Since Hu Zhuanglin and Gu Yueguo first introduced multimodality into foreign

language teaching research in 2007 (Hu et al., 2007: 7-8), significant progress has been made in both theory and practice in this field.

3.3.1.1. Theoretical Analysis

From 2014 to 2024, the development of multimodal teaching theory at the theoretical level has shown the following trends. First, Zhang Delu (Zhang D.;2018) summarized that the theory has continuously evolved through inheritance and innovation, and its application in the multimodal field has further deepened the theoretical interpretation of language functions and semiotic resources. Second, Zhou Jinyou and Yu Hui (2022) further elaborated on the functionality and dynamics of multimodal semiotic systems in social communication from the perspective of systemic functional linguistics, emphasizing the synergistic role of language and other semiotic resources. Additionally, theoretical research has begun to focus on the semantic generation mechanisms of multimodal semiotic systems, revealing the internal logic of multimodal resources in cognitive activation and meaning construction (Huang Guowen, 2021). Moreover, the application of multimodal theory in cross-cultural communication has attracted increasing attention, highlighting the importance of non-verbal information in cross-cultural interactions (Zhao Xiufeng, 2023). Finally, in the context of intelligent education, multimodal theory has provided theoretical support for personalized teaching through the analysis of multimodal data (Li Ming, 2020). Overall, during this period, the development of multimodal teaching theory has placed greater emphasis on interdisciplinary integration, cognitive activation, and data-driven theoretical innovation.

3.3.1.2. Pedagogical Model

The construction of multimodal teaching models from 2014 to 2024 has focused on practical applications integrated with technological advancements, aiming to enhance teaching effectiveness and students' comprehensive abilities through multimodal means. With the development of emerging technologies such as 5G, VR, and AI, multimodal teaching models have continuously incorporated new technologies to improve interactivity and engagement in teaching. For example, Gan Ronghui and He Gaoda (2019) explored the pathways for intelligent foreign language teaching in the 5G era, highlighting that 5G technology promotes the interactivity of multimodal teaching resources and the intelligence of teaching environments. Fan Bingbing and Li Zhanzi (2023) investigated the application of AIGC-assisted multimodal discourse teaching, exploring the potential of AI text-to-image models in foreign language teaching. Innovative teaching models such as the SECI model and VR-based multimodal cross-cultural teaching models have been developed to enhance teaching effectiveness and student engagement. Zhang Shanshan et al. (2024) proposed a multimodal teaching model based on the SECI model to optimize the teaching process. Shao Yu and Zhang Le (2024) constructed a

VR-based multimodal cross-cultural teaching model, which was proven effective in improving student engagement and academic performance. Moreover, multimodal teaching models have increasingly emphasized personalization and intelligence by leveraging big data and learning analytics to meet diverse student needs. For example, Tang Qianwen et al. (2024) developed a multimodal learning analytics model for smart classrooms, using multimodal data collection and analysis to achieve personalized teaching.

3.3.2. Mirco-level Research

3.3.2.1. Research on Multimodal Listening and Speaking Instruction

Multimodal listening and speaking instruction is significant in enhancing students' comprehensive language abilities, with research focusing on several key areas. Firstly, the design and optimization of multimodal listening and speaking instruction models have been explored. For example, Huang Wei (2016) empirically demonstrated that multimodal environments significantly improve college students' listening comprehension and oral expression abilities, highlighting the importance of multimodal instruction in promoting holistic student development. Secondly, the impact of multimodal instruction on students' language skills has been investigated. Rui Yanping and Ji Huijun (2017) found that multimodal instruction effectively alleviates students' oral anxiety, particularly in enhancing self-efficacy, reducing avoidance behaviors, and improving proactive tendencies. Additionally, the application of multimodal listening and speaking instruction in various teaching contexts has garnered attention. Chen Xi and Gu Jincheng (2022) studied the effects of multimodal blended classrooms on academic English listening output in Sino-Australian cooperative programs, revealing that this model improves students' working memory, enhances classroom meaning construction, and ultimately boosts the quality of academic English listening output. Overall, research on multimodal listening and speaking instruction is primarily empirical, emphasizing the use of scientific data to validate the effectiveness of teaching models and offering new perspectives and methods for foreign language instruction.

3.3.2.2. Research on Multimodal Classroom Discourse

The importance of multimodal classroom discourse research lies in revealing the synergistic roles of multiple modes (such as oral language, written language, images, and audio) in the teaching process and their impact on student learning outcomes, thereby providing theoretical support for optimizing teaching design and enhancing teaching effectiveness. In recent years, researchers have explored this field from various angles. Zhang Sheru and Yan Zhao (2014) found through empirical research that multimodal instruction effectively reduces students' cognitive load, stimulates their motivation to learn, and promotes knowledge internalization, especially in skill-based training and knowledge acquisition. Sun Xin et al. (2021) analyzed teacher scaffolding in content-language integrated classrooms from a sociocultural

perspective, discovering that teachers use a variety of linguistic and non-linguistic modes (such as gaze, gestures, and facial expressions) to facilitate student learning and flexibly employ modal resources according to different teaching stages to achieve teaching objectives. Lei Xi and Zhang Chunlei (2022) proposed a multimodal stylistic analysis framework for English classroom teaching based on multimodal stylistics theory, analyzing the modal synergy in exemplary teaching videos. They found that language is the dominant mode, while audio and visual modes reinforce language content, and body language enhances the learning experience with high modality appropriateness. These studies have laid the foundation for the theoretical framework of multimodal teaching, emphasizing the importance of targeted and synergistic modality selection in teaching design.

3.3.2.3. Research on Multiliteracy Development

Multiliteracy, involving reading and writing skills, has long been a focal point for domestic scholars. Theoretically, Zhang Delu (2014) constructed a multiliteracy teaching model based on systemic functional linguistics, laying the foundation for localized research. Lei Xi (2022) further explored hybrid foreign language teaching from an interactive perspective, emphasizing the enhancement of students' comprehensive abilities in multimodal environments. In practice, Zhang Delu and Liu Rui (2014) demonstrated specific teaching models for multiliteracy development through student oral reports. Zhao Dequan and Su Yanping (2023) explored blended online-offline teaching pathways in the "Internet+" era. Additionally, Lei Xi and Zhang Delu (2018) examined the positive impact of multimodal teaching on students' multiliteracy from the perspective of identity in multimodal writing. The widespread use of empirical research methods, such as Qin Qin and Liu Wei's (2014) study on modality conversion abilities, has provided scientific evidence for multiliteracy development.

3.3.2.4. Research on Multimodal Vocabulary Instruction and Dictionary Compilation

Vocabulary is the foundation and core of English teaching. Optimized dictionary compilation aids students' autonomous learning outside the classroom, while teacher-led vocabulary instruction is more direct and efficient, enhancing the quality and effectiveness of vocabulary learning. Between 2014 and 2024, significant progress was made in both theoretical and practical aspects of multimodal vocabulary instruction and dictionary compilation in China. Theoretically, Zhang Yihua (2021) proposed the design concept of a converged media dictionary, emphasizing the integration of multimodal elements with dictionary definitions and providing a new theoretical framework for dictionary compilation. Zhang Yihua (2024) further explored the definition patterns of multimodal dictionaries under a converged media framework, proposing a theoretical basis based on multimodal semiotics and construction grammar to support the dynamic interactivity of dictionary definitions. Practically, Wu

Chunming (2014) introduced a multimodal narrative teaching model that combines vocabulary instruction with narrative and multimodal approaches to enhance the contextual and communicative aspects of vocabulary teaching. Li Siying and Gao Yuan (2016) found through empirical research that mobile-assisted language learning (MALL) combined with multimodal methods is significantly more effective than traditional computer-assisted language learning (CALL) in vocabulary retention. Additionally, empirical research on multimodal vocabulary instruction has increased, such as comparative studies on the effects of multimodal presentation methods on vocabulary acquisition, providing scientific evidence for teaching practice.

3.3.2.5. Research on Multimodal Textbooks

Research on multimodal textbooks primarily involves the analysis of discourse features and the principles and concepts of textbook compilation. In recent years, scholars have explored multimodal textbooks from various perspectives. Cao Yufei and Ding Yiwen (2023) compared Chinese and foreign perspectives to examine the Chinese characteristics of foreign language speech textbooks in China. They argued that textbooks should not only systematically convey speech knowledge but also integrate the core values of socialism with Chinese characteristics through speech topics, main texts, discourse systems, and multimodal elements. Wei Zhaoxia and Chen Xiangjing (2024) explored how the New Future College English textbook enhances learners' emotional, cognitive, and behavioral engagement through situational dramas, multimodal teaching materials, and task design based on experiential learning theory, thereby improving teaching and educational outcomes. These studies provide theoretical support for the scientific compilation and effective application of multimodal textbooks, promoting the multimodal shift in foreign language teaching.

3.3.2.6. Research on Multimodal Translation Instruction

The significance of multimodal translation instruction lies in its ability to meet the diverse information dissemination needs of the digital age and to cultivate translators' capabilities in handling multiple modal symbols, thereby better meeting the demand for multimodal text translation in cross-cultural communication. In recent years, scholars have made significant progress in multimodal translation instruction, exploring its theoretical framework and practical methods from different perspectives. Wu Jing and Long Minghui (2023) proposed three sub-capabilities for multimodal translation: language translation ability, visual literacy, and multimodal integration ability, emphasizing the importance of awareness of visual symbol cultural differences. They argued that multimodal translation instruction should not only cultivate students' understanding and application of visual elements but also train them through multimodal translation case studies to interpret the relationship between images and text and to become

familiar with multimodal integration strategies. Additionally, Chen Xi, Pan Hanting, and Pan Li (2020) reviewed the progress of multimodal translation research both domestically and internationally, pointing out that domestic multimodal translation instruction suffers from limited scope and a singular perspective. They proposed strengthening theoretical construction, expanding empirical research fields, and advancing corpus development to provide direction for the future development of multimodal translation instruction.

4. Achievements, Shortcomings, and Future Research Suggestions of Multimodal Foreign Language Teaching Research in China

4.1. Achievements and Shortcomings of Multimodal Foreign Language Teaching Research in China

Over the past decade, multimodal foreign language teaching research in China has made significant progress, both in theoretical development and practical application. The research has shown a fluctuating upward trend in publication volume, indicating increasing attention and interest from scholars. The integration of multimodal teaching with emerging technologies such as 5G, VR, and AI has opened new pathways for enhancing teaching effectiveness and student engagement. Additionally, the development of multimodal teaching models and the exploration of their applications in various contexts have demonstrated the potential of multimodal approaches to transform traditional foreign language teaching.

However, several shortcomings remain. First, the dominance of non-empirical research suggests a lack of robust empirical validation for many theoretical proposals. While theoretical discussions and model-building are essential, empirical studies are crucial for verifying the practical effectiveness of multimodal teaching methods. Second, the research scope is relatively narrow, with a focus on macro-level studies such as teaching models and theoretical analysis, while micro-level studies, especially those related to specific language skills beyond listening and speaking, are underrepresented. Third, the integration of multimodal teaching with other disciplines, such as cognitive science and educational technology, is still in its infancy. This limits the depth and breadth of multimodal research, as these interdisciplinary connections are vital for comprehensive understanding and application.

Another limitation is the insufficient attention to the practical application of multimodal teaching in diverse educational contexts. While some studies have explored the use of multimodal approaches in specific settings, such as smart classrooms or online teaching environments, there is a need for more research on how these methods can be adapted to different levels of education and student populations. Finally, the development of multimodal teaching materials and resources, such as textbooks and dictionaries, is still in the early stages. More research is needed to ensure that these materials effectively support multimodal

learning and teaching.

4.2. Suggestions for Future Multimodal Teaching Research in China

To address the current shortcomings and further advance multimodal foreign language teaching research in China, several suggestions are proposed. First, there is a need to increase the proportion of empirical research. Scholars should conduct more experimental and quasi-experimental studies to validate the effectiveness of multimodal teaching models and methods. This will provide a solid empirical foundation for the widespread adoption of multimodal approaches in foreign language teaching.

Second, future research should expand its scope to cover a broader range of language skills and teaching contexts. For example, more studies should focus on multimodal approaches to reading, writing, and translation, as these skills are equally important in foreign language education. Additionally, research should explore the application of multimodal teaching in different educational settings, such as primary and secondary schools, vocational education, and adult education, to ensure that these methods are adaptable and effective across diverse contexts.

Third, interdisciplinary collaboration should be encouraged. By integrating multimodal research with fields such as cognitive science, educational technology, and psychology, scholars can gain deeper insights into the mechanisms underlying multimodal learning and teaching. This interdisciplinary approach will also help develop more comprehensive theoretical frameworks and practical applications.

Fourth, the development of multimodal teaching materials should be prioritized. Scholars and educators should work together to create high-quality multimodal textbooks, dictionaries, and other resources that integrate multimodal elements effectively. These materials should be designed to support both teachers and students in implementing multimodal teaching and learning strategies.

Finally, more attention should be given to the practical application of multimodal teaching in real-world contexts. This includes exploring the challenges and opportunities associated with integrating multimodal approaches into existing curricula and teaching practices. Additionally, research should focus on the professional development of teachers, providing them with the necessary training and support to effectively implement multimodal teaching methods.

In conclusion, while multimodal foreign language teaching research in China has made notable progress, there is still much work to be done. By addressing the current shortcomings and following the suggested directions, future research can contribute to the further development and application of multimodal teaching, ultimately enhancing the quality of foreign language education in China.

5. Conclusion

In summary, the research on multimodal foreign language teaching in China has

achieved significant progress over the past decade, with increased publication trends, enhanced theoretical development, and practical applications driven by emerging technologies. However, several challenges remain, including the dominance of non-empirical studies, narrow research scope, and insufficient practical application in diverse educational contexts.

To address these issues, future research should prioritize empirical validation, expand the focus to include a broader range of language skills and educational settings, and foster interdisciplinary collaboration. Additionally, the development of multimodal teaching materials and teacher training programs is essential for effective implementation. By building on current achievements and addressing identified shortcomings, multimodal foreign language teaching can continue to evolve, ultimately enhancing the quality and effectiveness of language education in China. This will better prepare learners for the multimodal communication demands of the modern world.

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