

Chinese English Teaching Research From the Perspective of Multimodal Discourse Analysis

WANG Hui, WANG Yu

Tianjin University of Finance and Economics, Tianjin, China

Based on 15 kinds of domestic CSSCI journals published about multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) in English teaching, this research discussed the current research status of multimodal discourse analysis in English teaching in China from the aspects of the number and distribution of research results, research topics, research methods, and development trends, and further discussed the reasons for this situation. It pointed out that there are three main problems in the research of multimodal discourse in China: The research framework needs further testing. The multimodal resources are relatively insufficient. The subjects of the research are not balanced. At the same time, this paper summarized the future development trend and provided new points of view for future multimodal English teaching.

Keywords: multimodal discourse, English teaching, Internet

Literature Review

Multimodal discourse analysis (MDA) theory first appeared in the 1990s, and then began to be widely used in all kinds of discourse analysis, especially classroom discourse analysis. For English teaching, it is naturally a multi-modal process. In English class, only a single language is not enough for teachers to fully express the deep meaning to learners in order to achieve the goal of ideal teaching. Therefore, the transformation of teacher discourse from the language-based discourse is gradually realized through the utilization of multi-modal resources. In other words, multimodal discourse is not only the medium of teaching, but also one of the channels of student input. Kress and van Leeuwen (1996) applied the idea of axis relation and meta-function to image analysis and created visual design grammar. The book became a seminal classic and revolutionized the field of discourse analysis. Since then, scholars from different fields have explored the analytical framework, research methods, and theories of multimodal discourse analysis through the analysis of various data (O'Halloran, 2005; Lemke, 1998; Jewitt, 2004; Norris, 2004), which set off a boom in the study of multimodal discourse in the West.

China's multi-modal discourse research started later. Li Zhanzi (2003) was the first Chinese scholar to use multimodal discourse analysis, and then many scholars timely sorted out the origin, research methods, and research fields of China's multi-modal discourse research (Li & Lu, 2012; Li, 2013; Feng & O'Halloran, 2014). Later, other scholars began to gradually apply the related theories of multimodal theory in English teaching.

WANG Hui, postgraduate, School of Humanities, Tianjin University of Finance and Economics, Tianjin, China.

WANG Yu, associate professor, School of Humanities, Tianjin University of Finance and Economics, Tianjin, China.

At present, the application of multimodal discourse analysis theory in English teaching has been developed for 15 years, but scholars have not combed the research results. Therefore, this study takes 87 articles in CSSCI core foreign language journals in the past 13 years as the research object. Through multi-angle statistics and analysis, this paper summarizes the existing problems and future development direction of MDA in English teaching.

Study Design

Data Collection

In recent years, the research results of multimodal discourse analysis in foreign language teaching mainly focus on journals and books. Some of books (Zhang, 2015; Tian, 2019) provide some research frameworks and theoretical guidance for the study of multimodal English teaching. Empirical studies on the application of multimodal discourse analysis in English teaching mainly focus on journals. Since journals can represent the general level of multimodal discourse analysis in foreign language teaching practice in recent years, this study selected 87 empirical papers on multimodal discourse analysis in English teaching published in CSSCI from 2010 to 2022 as data sources to explore the current situation and development trend of multimodal discourse analysis theory in English teaching in China.

Research Methods

This paper adopts the method of combining quantitative and qualitative analysis. Firstly, the distribution of relevant results is analyzed from the time, quantity, and the main journals published. Then the basic situation of journal achievements is analyzed by statistical method. Finally, the research results are explained and evaluated, and the future development trend is predicted.

The specific steps are as follows: (1) All journal papers on “multimodal English teaching” in CSSCI up to October 2022 were retrieved. Irrelevant papers, such as theoretical analysis, and book reviews were removed, and empirical papers were mainly discussed; (2) The research made statistics on the research topics of papers and then discussed the current situation and basic characteristics of multimodal discourse in English teaching in China according to the statistical results; and (3) This paper discussed the problems and future trends of MDA in English teaching in China.

Results

In the past 13 years from 2010 to October 2022, CSSCI published 87 research papers on MDA (see Figure 1). The following is an overview of the research on MDA in English learning in China from three aspects: (1) the journals that published the research results and their distribution year by year; (2) the research topics of multimodal English teaching; and (3) research methods of empirical research on multimodal English teaching.

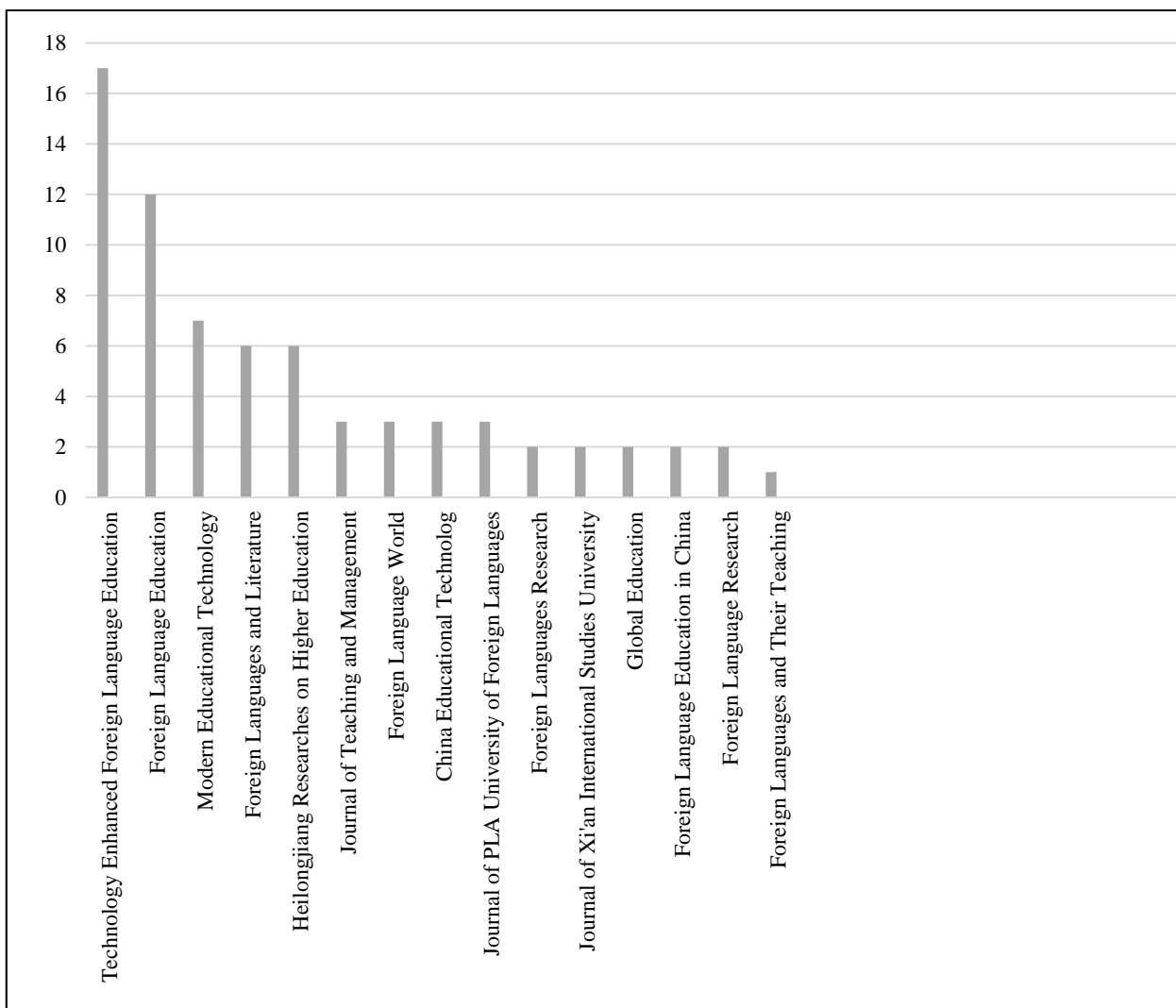


Figure 1. Publication volume of each core journal (2010-2022).

The Distribution of Journal Outcomes in Multimodal English Teaching

First of all, as far as the distribution of journal achievements of multimodal discourse analysis in English teaching is concerned, the number of journals is uneven (see Figure 1). The journals with more publications are Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education and Foreign Language Education. Among them, Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education has published 17 empirical analysis papers from 2010 to 2022, accounting for 20% of the total publications. This is due to the interdisciplinary nature of MDA theory and the use of multimodality in teaching usually requires computer-assisted resources for teaching. Therefore, journals that mainly discuss the application of computer networks and multimedia technology in foreign language teaching, such as Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education and Modern Educational Technology, have become the preferred journals for researchers to publish research results. The second journal with a relatively high number of publications is Foreign Language Education, a journal devoted to English teaching, with a total of 12 articles. It can be seen that the journal is highly recognized.

From the perspective of publication time (see Figure 2), the number of papers with the theme of “multimodal English teaching” reached a peak in 2013, with a total of 11 papers, accounting for 13% of the total. The reason

is that at this stage, due to various MDA frameworks and analytical theories, many empirical studies on this topic have sprung up. However, after 2013, the number of papers published gradually decreased and tended to be flat. The reason is that the research on the application of multimodal theory in foreign language teaching is still in the initial stage, and the emerging preliminary research on multimodal English learning has been relatively saturated. With the development of educational technology and the change of the overall environment, the research on multimodal English teaching in the new context is facing a bottleneck and will enter the next new stage. It can be seen from Figure 2 that the number of journals published will reach a climax again in 2020, with the number of 10. The reason is that after nearly 10 years of development, multimodal English teaching in this stage urgently needs a new paradigm in practice. Scholars have started extensive discussions on this topic.

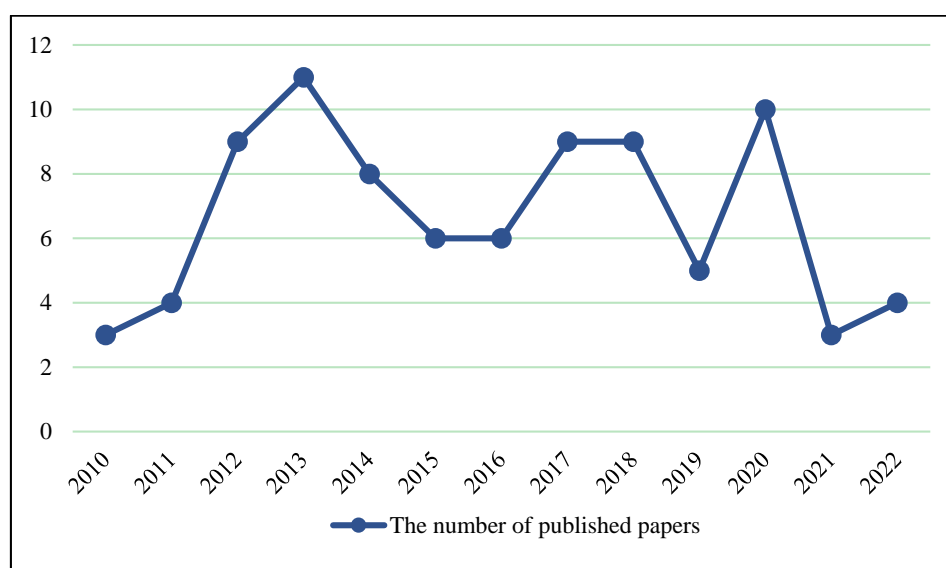


Figure 2. Statistics of the total number of papers on the topic of “multimodal English teaching” published in core journals.

Research Topics in Multimodal English Teaching

Figure 3 represents the research topics of multimodal discourse in English teaching. From a macro perspective, it is mainly about language skills, namely listening, speaking, reading, and writing, accounting for 22%, 17%, 20%, and 10% respectively. In addition, there are also other types of teaching research, such as teacher teaching and multimodal curriculum evaluation, accounting for 31%. Among them, the empirical research on multimodal listening teaching is the most, followed by reading teaching, and the empirical research on writing teaching is the least. The reason for the most empirical research on English listening is that with the development of artificial intelligence and Internet technology, students have gradually increased their access to multimedia resources, and teachers have gradually increased their use of multimedia resources. A wide range of audio and video resources provide students with a good listening learning environment. Reading teaching itself is an important and traditional aspect that Chinese teachers and students pay attention to. The introduction of multimodal theory has injected new vitality into reading teaching. In 1944, the concept of multiple reading and writing abilities proposed by the members of the “New London Group” composed of 11 linguists had a wide impact on scholars (Cope & Kalantzis, 2000). The paper “Multiple Reading Pedagogy: Designing the Future of Society” published by the New London Change Group is recognized as the beginning of the research on multiple reading and writing, which is of milestone significance (Zhu, 2008). Since then, the study of multiple reading

and writing abilities has aroused great academic interest internationally and has also promoted the development and research of various aspects of English skills teaching in China. However, among the four teaching empirical research on original skills, the research on writing teaching is the least, which belongs to exploration stage, and still needs a new universal multimodal teaching mode.

From the micro-perspective, the research themes have different emphases at different stages. Early multimodal English teaching focused on the research on the application effect of simple modal resources, that is, the introduction of pictures and videos was used to reflect the positive role of multimodality in English teaching. In terms of multimodal research on writing, in addition to the traditional use of modal resources, such as pictures and videos, to introduce writing classes to reflect the positive role of multimodality in writing teaching, there is also research on multimodal metaphor in English writing teaching (Liang, 2013). In addition, there is research on the cultivation of English learning motivation by using multimodal theory. Xu and Liu (2018) constructed a multimodal experimental project from the perspective of multimodal theory to stimulate students' pre-writing motivation, thereby promoting the improvement of the overall writing level. With an in-depth understanding of multimodal theory, researchers began to explore the impact of various modes of synergy on English teaching. For example, Chen, Yang, and Cao (2014), based on John Hammer's balanced activity approach, discussed how to achieve the balance between students and teachers, teachers and teaching materials, and students and teaching materials in college English classroom teaching in a multimedia multimodal environment. The recent trend of research on multimodal English teaching is to focus on the integration of online and offline courses and the research and development of online course resources. For example, Ding and Yang (2019) combined the research with the development practice of the "Star English" teaching platform. His research elaborated the importance of multimodal theory and application in the development of high-quality teaching resources from six aspects.

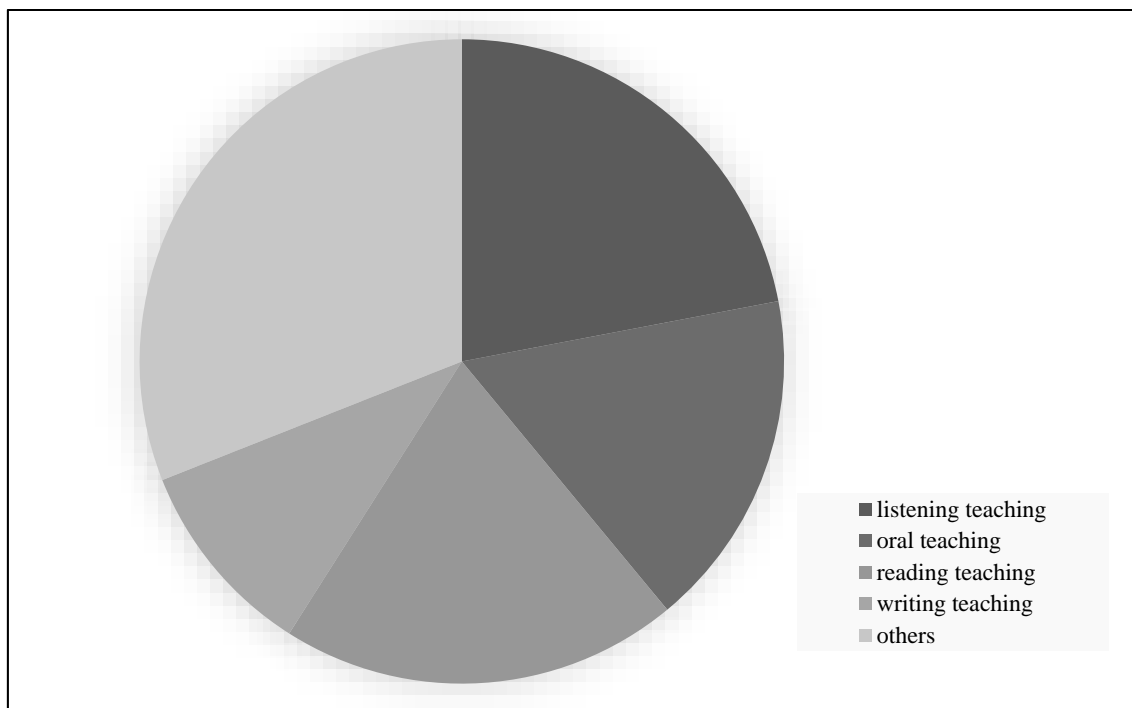


Figure 3. Number of research papers on the theory of multimodal discourse analysis on language skills in English teaching (2010-2022).

Research Methods for Multimodal English Teaching

In terms of research methods of multimodal discourse in English teaching, all empirical research methods use a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, and most of them set up experimental and control groups for comparative research (such as Liang, 2013; Sun, Wang, & Hong, 2021; Yan, 2019). In addition, research methods of multimodal foreign language teaching tend to be combined with teaching methods and other theories, such as genre theory, relevance theory, etc. Most of the current empirical studies use quantitative analysis software (such as Qu & Zhou, 2020), such as Elan, Praat, and other software for multi-modal collaboration and coordination annotation. In addition, various scholars have basically put forward their own research frameworks, such as Yan (2019)'s multi reading and writing model for high school English teaching, Wang's (2020) multi-modal interaction model for college students' English learning, etc.

Research Subjects of Multimodal English Teaching

In terms of the research subjects of multimodal discourse in English teaching (see Figure 4), most of these empirical studies are college students, accounting for 82%. There is less multimodal research on students and teachers in other learning stages. The research on multimodal English teaching for college students and senior high school students mainly focuses on skills courses such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing; the research on primary school students' English teaching mainly focuses on the multimodal analysis of textbooks (Wang & Jiang, 2015). The application of university teachers in multimodality is mainly reflected in lesson preparation and the use of teacher scaffolding. In the age of the Internet, the positive role of multimodality in foreign language teaching has been fully verified. Research results showed that multimodal resources can play a positive role in foreign language teaching. It is necessary to abandon the traditional teaching method of "blackboard + mouth". Teachers need to recreate the teaching materials and prepare lessons with resources of various modes. At present, there are few applied research in this field. Zhang (2015) proposed a theoretical framework for the study of multimodal discourse translation based on the social semiotics of systemic-functional linguistics. Taking the transfer from textbook to classroom as an example, he analyzed the influencing factors of the transfer, the change in modal media and meaning and its effects. Qu and Zhou (2020), based on online and offline multimodal learning resources, conducted input and output training for students in accordance with the "golden lesson" standard to cultivate students' critical thinking and communication ability, providing a good paradigm for teachers to prepare lessons. The other is the multimodal analysis of teacher scaffolding. Teachers' scaffolding has linguistic and non-linguistic characteristics. For example, Sun et al. (2021) found that the main mode of teacher scaffolding in the language mode in the English classroom is spoken language, while written language mode is less and only co-occurs with spoken language. The teachers' use of gestures in nonverbal modes is the highest, mainly metaphorical gestures and indicative gestures.

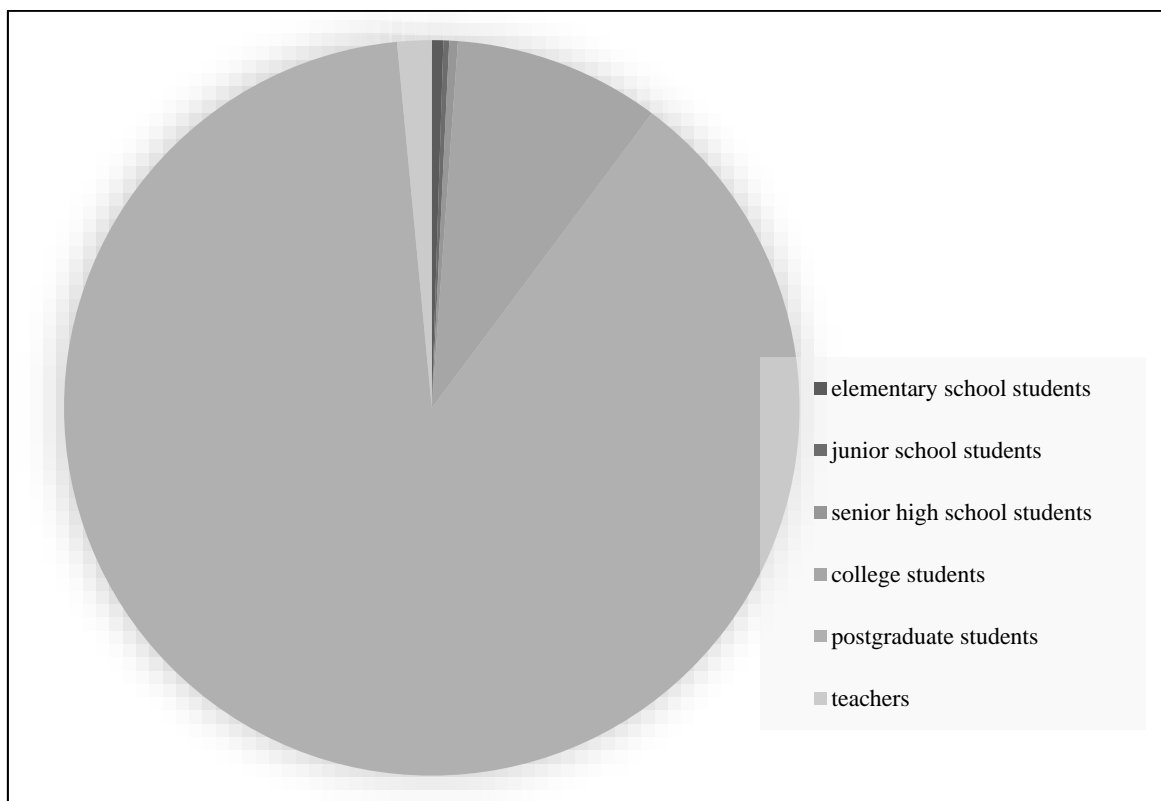


Figure 4. The number of research subjects of multimodal English teaching literature (2010-2022).

Discussion: The Problems and Prospects of Multimodal English Teaching in China

Unexamined Research Frameworks of Multimodal English Teaching

In terms of research methods, although many scholars have initially proposed a research framework for different contents of multimodal English learning, as a social science, multimodal foreign language teaching also needs to constantly test the framework to ensure that its research scope is universal. In particular, multimodal English teaching is a dynamic system, and it is difficult to have a specific research path to guide teaching accurately. Therefore, scholars need to further explore the research framework of multimodal English teaching. At the same time, we should constantly strengthen the innovation of multimodal discourse analysis theory. At present, the development of the theory is still constantly updated, because it is combined with teaching, and its role is increasing as an analytical tool. The interdisciplinary nature of multimodal discourse analysis requires the constant addition of new content. Therefore, the further deepening of the theory is also a trend.

Relatively Deficient of Multimodal Resources

The impact of the overall environment has led to the suspension of many schools. As a result, online and live courses have risen rapidly. In addition, contemporary students are born in a relatively developed Internet era. As native netizens, students need interesting and sophisticated online courses. Using the theory of multimodality, the development of online courses and the research on the combination of online and offline modes have become the inevitable and practical needs of English teaching. At present, such multimodal resources are not perfect, and future researchers should pay attention to the research and development of this aspect.

Unbalanced Research Subjects

At present, the research topic of multimodal foreign language teaching is mostly college students, and the research on multimodal English learning for primary and secondary school students and college students is not enough. Therefore, in future research, it is necessary to strengthen the research on this learning stage to ensure that multimodal English teaching can have a vertical development, and prevent students from entering the advanced stage of the phenomenon of fault. Follow-up researchers should observe the impact of multimodal resources on students and the differences in the comprehensive use of modes in various learning stages so as to have a more comprehensive understanding of their understanding. In addition, English teachers should abandon the traditional acts of “blackboard teaching”, renew the teaching concept, and cultivate the awareness of multimodal reading and output, so as to promote students’ multimodal reading ability and cross-cultural communication ability.

Conclusion

With the development of the network, the research of multimodal teaching will become a hot topic. Based on the papers on multimodal discourse analysis published in 15 Chinese foreign language CSSCI journals, the research combed the research status quo of multimodal discourse in China from the number and distribution of research results, development trends, research methods, research contents, research perspectives, etc. This study also discussed the data obtained, pointed out the problems of multimodal discourse research in China, and proposed the development direction. The empirical research on multimodal teaching has shown a downward trend, and the research model adapting to the new context needs to be produced urgently. In terms of research methods, multimodal discourse in English teaching tends to rely on other theories. In terms of research subjects, most of them are college students, while the research on multimodal language of primary and secondary school students and teachers is relatively small. From the research topics, the development of online curriculum resources and multimodal resources will become the trend of multimodal English teaching in the future. In future research, it is believed that scholars will further improve multimodal English teaching and promote the development of English language teaching.

References

- Chen, Z. F., Yang, Y., & Cao, Z. H. (2014). The construction of the dynamic balance teaching mode in college English class on the basis of multimodality and multimedia. *Journal of Xidian University (Social Science Edition)*, 24(4), 110-115.
- Cope, B., & Kalantzis, M. (2000). *Multiliteracies: Literacy learning and the design of social futures*. London: Routledge.
- Dai, S. L. (2013). The origin and development of multimodal discourse analysis. *Foreign Language Research*, 35(2), 17-23.
- Ding, T., & Yang, Y. L. (2019). Basic principles in online courseware development—A multimodality perspective. *Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education*, 40(4), 33-38.
- Feng, D. Z., & O'Halloran, K. L. (2014). Advances and frontiers in multimodal discourse analysis. *Contemporary Linguistics*, 16(1), 88-89.
- Jewitt, C. (2004). Multimodality and new communication technologies. In K. L. Halloran (Ed.), *Multimodal discourse analysis* (pp. 184-194). London and New York: Continuum.
- Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. (1996). *Reading images: The grammar of visual design*. London: Routledge.
- Lemke, J. L. (1998). Multimodal genres and transmedia traversals: Social semiotics and the political economy of the sign. *Semiotica*, 173(1-4), 283-297.
- Li, H. B. (2013). Multimodal research methods and research fields. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, 21(3), 21-25.
- Li, Z. Z. (2003). Social semiotic approach to multimodal discourse. *Foreign Languages Research*, 29(5), 1-8.

- Li, Z. Z., & Lu, D. Y. (2012). Multimodal semiotics: Theoretical basis, research approach and development prospect. *Foreign Languages Research*, 28(2), 1-8.
- Liang, X. H. (2013). The application of multimodal metaphors in the teaching of English writing: A case study of comparative essays. *Foreign Languages Research*, 29(5), 24-31.
- Norris, S. (2004). *Analyzing multimodal interaction: A methodological framework*. London: Routledge.
- O'Halloran, K. L. (2005). *Mathematical discourse: Language, symbolism and visual images*. London & New York: Continuum.
- Qu, J. L., & Zhou, S. (2020). Design and reflection of English good course with multi-modal technology in the Internet+ mode. *Journal of Xi'an International Studies University*, 28(4), 60-64.
- Sun, X., Wang, P. P., & Hong, Y. N. (2021). A multimodal study of teacher scaffolding in a content and language integrated classroom. *Foreign Languages in China*, 18(1), 67-71.
- Tian, H. L. (2019). *Multimodal discourse analysis: Theoretical exploration and practical research*. N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Wang, R. H., & Jiang, G. Y. (2015). Multimodal foreign language teaching: Blending of image and language resources. *Journal of Schooling Studies*, 12(3), 84-90.
- Wang, X. M. (2020). An empirical study on multimodal interactive college English teaching. *Heilongjiang Researches on Higher Education*, 38(1), 152-156.
- Xu, X., & Liu, Y. M. (2018). A case study of cultivating pre-writing motivation based on multimodality theory. *Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education*, 39(1), 25-31.
- Yan, X. D. (2019). Research on application of multivariate reading and writing mode in senior secondary school English teaching. *Journal of Teaching and Management*, 35(18), 104-106.
- Zhang, D. L. (2015). *Multimodal discourse analysis theory and foreign language teaching*. Beijing: Higher Education Press.
- Zhang, D. L., & Qu, T. (2015). Translation in multimodal discourse: From college English textbook to classroom teaching. *Technology Enhanced Foreign Language Education*, 36(6), 17-23.
- Zhu, Y. S. (2008). Multiple literacy and its enlightenment to Chinese English teaching reform. *Foreign Languages Research*, 24(4), 10-14.