

A SYSTEMATIC REVIEW OF STUDIES ON ENGLISH LEARNING FOR ETHNIC MINORITY STUDENTS IN CHINA: 2010-2019

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ABSTRACT

In the past ten years, the research on English learning as EFL (English as Foreign Language) for ethnic minority students in China has made significant progress. It would be beneficial to review what has been done and what needs to be explored further. This paper performs a content analysis on English learning as EFL among ethnic minority students in China. It covers articles published from 2010 to 2019 to glimpse the research trends regarding the research progress and significant themes explored in the field. Thirty-two articles published in key journals in China were identified and selected from China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Six aspects of research in the field were examined, namely: (1) the annual publication trend, (2) themes, (3) ethnic minority groups and regional distribution, (4) subject educational level, (5) research instruments, and, (6) regional distribution of the research sites. Three limitations with the extant studies were delineated: (1) biased coverage on the research subjects, (2) singularity and lack of triangulation of research methods, (3) lack of broad and in-depth research findings. The findings may give insights to future research on the EFL teaching and learning among ethnic minorities in China and research projects of the exact nature.

Keywords: EFL, ethnic minority, research trends

INTRODUCTION

There are altogether 56 nationals in China. In China, the term “nationality” does not refer to citizenship but a people group, namely, those of the same race, religion, cultures, and traditions. While the Hans from the majority nationality, the remaining 55 non-Han nationalities are commonly referred to as the ethnic minority groups. These include the Zhuangs, Mans, Muslims, Uyghurs, Miaos, Yis, Tujias, Tibetans, Mongolians, etc. Constituting 8.4% of the total population, there are proximately 114 million ethnic minorities in China (Xiang, M. 2017). Among these people groups, single nationalities such as the Zhuangs, Mans, Muslims, and Uyghurs are more than 10 million. Geographically, most minority groups are populated in the less developed northwest and southwest areas of China.

Almost every ethnic minority people speak their local dialects as their first language, whereas Mandarin is the sole official language from junior school education in China. English is considered the second language (L2) for the Han students, the majority nationality in China. For many ethnic minority students, English is their third language (L3), considering their mother tongue or tribal dialect is their first language and Mandarin their second language. In schools, these ethnic minority students need to master Mandarin before comprehending what the teachers instruct. Therefore, minority groups are disadvantageous in education comparing to Han. Besides, English is a mandatory course from primary school level to university level in China. The high requirement on multi-lingual mastery is a significant burden to many ethnic minority students.

With the advent of urbanisation and globalisation at the turn of the 21st century, Chinese ethnic minorities are more prepared to leave their remote homeland and relocate to bigger cities than ever. Provided that their English proficiency is up to the mark, they might even find themselves working for foreign enterprises in the big cities. Whether furthering their education or in a work context, embracing English as a foreign language (EFL) is one of the key challenges this group of youths faces. In recent years, the study of learning EFL among minority ethnic groups has gradually become one of the research interests in the field of education in China. This paper attempts to systemically review relevant literature in China in the past decade to identify the development trend of research for the reference of future research.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Studies in this field are hardly cohesive but somewhat fragmented (Shao, Wang & Li, 2019). A systematic literature review is attempted in this paper to fully unfold the picture of previous research on EFL among ethnic minority students in China. Therefore, in this paper, the following five (5) research questions will be addressed:

1. How was the distribution pattern of the publications related to EFL learning of ethnic minorities in China in the past decade?
2. What minority students were researched upon in this corpus of study?
3. What were the main themes in these studies?
4. What education levels were examined in these studies?
5. What data collection methods were employed in these studies?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS

To answer the five (5) questions mentioned above, a systematic literature review was conducted:

Step One: The formulation of inclusion criteria. The inclusion criteria should be predefined before conducting a systematic literature review (Robinson & Lowe, 2015). In this study, inclusion criteria were determined: database selection, publication times, and the appropriate keywords. Firstly, selected database. China National Knowledge Infrastructure

(CNKI) was the database selected given that this study focuses on EFL learning for ethnic minority students in China. Almost all researchers were from China and were EFL speakers. Their significant papers were published in Chinese and indexed in the CNKI. To note, CNKI is the largest and most well-recognized publication database in China. This database is considered to have high sensitivity to dictating the keywords used by users (Chen, 2013; Shao, Wang & Li, 2019).

Furthermore, only articles published in the national (China) level peer-reviewed key publications were included to shortlist high-quality studies. This means articles related to ethnic minority students and English learning but published in non-indexed journals were excluded. Secondly, appropriate keywords. To ensure the reported articles would closely link with "ethnic minority English learning", the keywords for articles were "ethnic minority," "English," "speaking," "writing," "reading," and "listening".

Step Two: Further screening of relevant publications. CNKI is the largest and most recognized computerized database in China. An advanced search with the keywords mentioned above in the CNKI database yielded a total of 61 articles. Two exclusion criteria are formulated to eliminate the relevant articles: First, the articles considered for analysis should be pretty recent, namely, published within the last ten years (2010-2019). Second, the themes of the target articles should be closely associated with the ethnic minority students in China and English learning. One has to reckon that reviewing all the published articles in human history is impossible (Okoli & Schabram, 2010). Hence, a period is determined to select articles—this study to provide insight from the recent scientific literature. The period was therefore restricted to publications within the recent decade from 2010 through 2019. Based on this criterion, 25 articles were dropped out. For the second criterion, the rationale is to ascertain the high correlation of selected articles with the objective of the current study. This step is to conduct by a further screening with the following aims: (1) they discuss topics related to learning English among ethnic minority students in China, for instance, related policies, teacher quality, and so forth; and secondly, (2) they provide only a conceptual framework as contrasted to empirical studies.

Moreover, to guarantee reliability in selecting relevant publications, the identification process was carried out by two researchers independently. The first researcher was the first author of this paper, the Head of Public English Department in a public university in China and had been in service for 15 years. The other researcher who was brought in for the screening was a long service and award-winning English language professor in a public university in China. Disagreements were resolved through face-to-face discussions. Eventually, the two raters reached an agreement on all inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting articles. After the two-step identification was performed, 32 articles were considered for the study, while the remaining 29 were dropped. Eventually, 32 articles from 61 journals, constituting 52% of the original selection, were deemed suitably aligned to meet the criteria for further analysis.

Step Three: Identification of relevant publications. To further ascertain the appropriateness of article selection in the previous two phases, the selected 32 articles were re-checked by carefully reading the full texts from beginning to end to ensure they met the required criteria. These 32 articles, thus, formed the primary source of content analysis for this study. As they were published in national-level peer-reviewed journals, their findings would call for some attention.

FINDINGS

To address the five (5) research questions mentioned above, a content analysis was conducted upon the selected 32 papers published in the National key journals. The findings could be categorised as follows.

Annual Distribution

Firstly, the findings indicate that the publication on ethnic minority EFL learners in China has remained low in the past three (3) years since 2017 (Figure 1). Earlier in 2012, publications on the subject matter showed an 'unusual' peak. The phenomenon might be credited to a few contributing factors. The surge in related publications might tie back to the founding of the Trilingual Education Research Association in 2009 and the inauguration of an International Symposium on Trilingual Phenomena and Trilingual Education in Minority Areas in China in the same year. These new moves may have attracted new or renewed research interests from linguistic researchers in this aspect. For example, Yuan (2010), Tian & Liu (2012), Zhou (2012), and Guo (2012) have all paid attention to English learning among ethnic minority students based on the trilingual language acquisition theory. Following that, two national-level ethnic minority English education projects were approved by the Ministry of Education of China in 2010 and 2012. However,

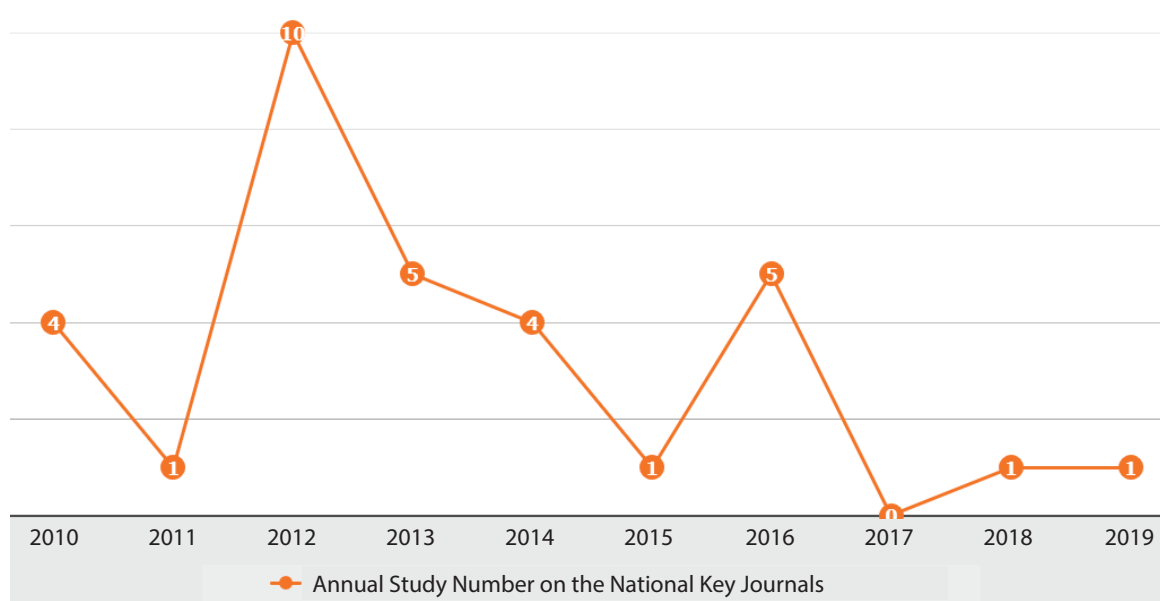


Figure 1 The Annual Distribution of Papers published on the National Key Journals during 2010-2019

publications on the subject matter experienced a decline, and there was no related publication in 2017. It might be so because the researchers encountered some bottlenecks associated with the limitation of the researchers' knowledge and, more possibly, the lack of interdisciplinary collaboration in research. According to the observation by Shao, Wang and Li (2019), researchers in this field seemed to be working in separate and individual ways. There was no observable community of researchers comprising professors, associate professors, lecturers, and teaching assistants in this respect.

Nationality Distribution of Subjects in 32 Empirical Studies

Sample Nationality Distribution reflects the importance of ranking a particular nationality in the selected studies. Two shortcomings are noticed in the selected 32 studies.

Firstly, in research practice, some researchers tend to pay attention to dozens of ethnic minority groups as a whole sample with neglecting their differences, which is referred to as the mixed ethnic minority sampling approach. Comparatively, in-depth studies on a single ethnic minority group are rare. These two approaches constitute the primary sampling methods of ethnic minority studies in China. For the mixed ethnic minority sampling approach, the proportion in the 32 studies is as high as 60% (Table 1). In essence, these studies did not pay attention to the different characteristics among different ethnic minorities. For example, the sample in the study of Yuan et al. (2010) included 18 ethnic minorities as a whole, while Zhou (2012) included five (5) ethnic minorities as an independent sample. By contrast, only a few papers,

accounting for about 24%, chose to conduct exclusive studies on a single minority group.

Secondly, it is notable that only one (1) out of 32 articles focused on the Zhuang students, namely, the largest minority population in China, which indicates that the Zhuang ethnic minority received very little attention. The study on mixed ethnic minorities has limitations as some researchers (Shao, Wang & Li, 2019) argued that the unique characteristics of the different nationalities might be missed in such research. Different nationalities are shaped by long-term behavioral choices in their history and psychological conditions in a specific environment. Each nationality is unique. Therefore, it is necessary to conduct in-depth research on English education based on a single ethnic minority to discover its specific issues. There is one of the research gaps that could be looked into in future studies.

Themes Distribution

The literature's research themes commonly reflect the scholars' focus in a specific period. Hence, the literature themes are used here as an essential indicator for statistical analysis. The basis on the published statistics of 2010-2019, about the topic of ethnic minority students English learning in China, the bulk of research interest was on the "English learning strategies", accounting for 19%, followed by "learning attitudes and learning difficulties" and "mother tongue (L1) and Chinese (L2) interference on English learning", which accounts for 16% respectively. Other aspects, such as learning performance, learning anxiety, learning motivation, and pronunciation, all receive particular attention, accounting for about 9%. However, it is also observed that a few sub-skills in English have been ignored. For example, scholars have not paid much

Table 1 Nationality Distribution of Subjects in 32 Studies

Sample	Ethnic Minority Group	Number	%
Single	Uighur	2	6%
	Zhuang	1	3%
	Yi	1	3%
	Tibetan	1	3%
	Korean	1	3%
	Mongolian	2	6%
Mixed	Several minorities as a whole	19	60%
Unidentified		5	16%

Table 2 Themes Distribution in 32 Studies

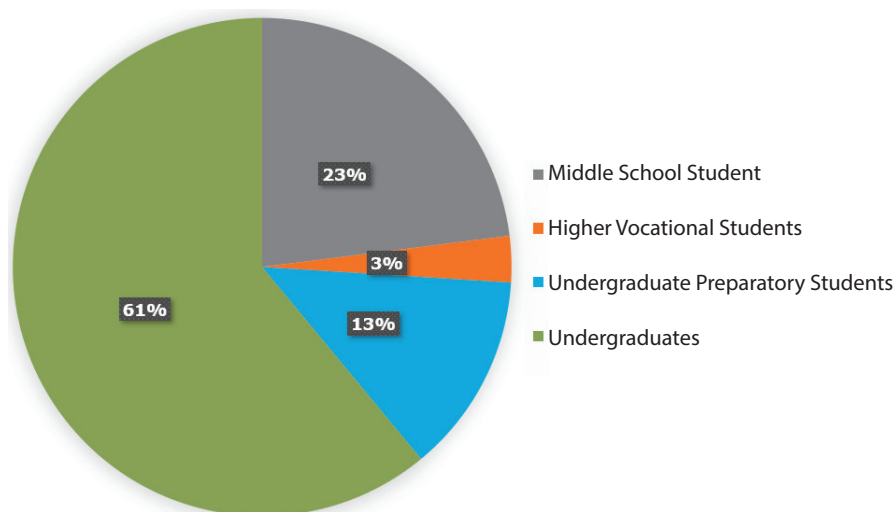
Categories	Subcategories	Authors	N	%
Learning strategies	English learning strategies	Qi & Chen, 2014; Yuan et al., 2010; Miley & Hu, 2010; Ma Zhang, 2016; Xu, 2011; Xu & Cao, 2012; Coa & Yao, 2010	7	22%
Motivation	Perception of importance and difficulties on English learning	Lu & Luo, 2012; Wang, 2016; Mei, 2014; Zhou, 2012; Yang L, 2019	5	16%
Language factors in learning	Mother tongue (L1) or Mandarin (L2) interference	Ma & Blachford, 2016; Tang, 2013; Guo & Luo, 2012; Tian & Liu, 2012; Cai & Yang, 2010	5	16%
	Pronunciation	Wu & Chen, 2016; Xu & Cao, 2012; Yang & Gao, 2015	3	9%
	Performance in English skills	Zhao & Xia, 2018; Yang & Yang, 2014; Wang, 2012; Pei, 2012	4	13%
Performance	Anxiety in learning English	Du, 2013; Hu, 2013; Li & Lin, 2013	3	9%
Personal emotional factors	Willingness to speak English	Du, 2014	1	3%
	Motivation of learning English	Zhou, 2013; Luo & Yi, 2012; Zhou, 2012	3	9%
	Self-efficacy	Ling, Qin & Guo, 2016	1	3%
Total			32	100%

attention to speaking, such as the public speaking skills among ethnic minorities. This is also a research gap that could be further addressed.

Sampling on Education Levels

Exploring further, the study examined the education level focused on the selected 32 papers. The findings revealed that they were distributed in the following four (4) education levels, namely, undergraduate students (61%), middle school students (23%), undergraduate preparatory students (13%), and vocational students (3%) as shown in Figure 2.

This shows that scholars are most interested in understanding EFL learning among undergraduate ethnic minority students, followed by middle school students. In contrast, ethnic minority students in both vocational colleges and postgraduates received little attention from researchers. This is probably because most researchers are working in institutions of higher learning where the samples and topics they undertook were related to their students, namely, the undergraduate students or middle school students where their students were researching or interning.


Figure 2 The Education Level Distribution of the 32 Studies

Data Collection Instruments

The research outcome to a large extent is determined by the instruments employed. In term of data collection tools employed in the previous studies, detailed findings are shown in the following in which two salient points are worth noting:

Firstly, among 32 selected studies, it was reported that the employment of questionnaires (n=18) was the most preferred data collection tool. Its proportion reached as high as 56%. Besides, the language skills test is also adopted as the sole data collection tool (9%). In total, the percentage of merely employing a single instrument in the study is 65%. This figure indicates that the majority of researchers currently resort to using a single tool to collect data.

Secondly, the most popular mixed method design is the combination of questionnaire and interview, accounting for 25%. Other approaches, such as "interview + test" and "questionnaire + test", are less frequently used in the studies. Their percentages are 3% and 3% respectively. Only one study out of 32 articles employed multiple instruments; namely, Hu (2013) used questionnaires, interviews, and tests to investigate the anxiety level in writing among EFL ethnic minority university students (Table 3).

Table 3 Distribution of The Data Collection Tools Employed in the 32 Studies

Data Collection Tool Total Number	Article Number (N=32)	Instruments	%
Type 1: one (1) instrument involved	18	Questionnaire only	56%
	3	Test only	9%
Type 2: Two (2) instrument involved	8	Questionnaire +Interview	25%
	1	Test +Interview	3%
	1	Questionnaire +Test	3%
Type 3: Three (3) instrument involved	1	Questionnaire +interview +Test	3%

Regional Distribution of the Research Sites in 32 Studies

Among the 31 provinces in China, these 32 studies on English learning of ethnic minority students were conducted in 13 provinces (Figure 3). Regarding the regional distribution, Hubei topped with six (6) published papers; followed by the Xinjiang with five (5) papers; Guizhou and Yunnan, four (4) papers respectively. Qinghai, Zhejiang and Ganshu, two (2) papers respectively. Jilin, Guangxi, Shaxi, Beijing, Inner Mongolia and Jiangxi, one (1) paper respectively.

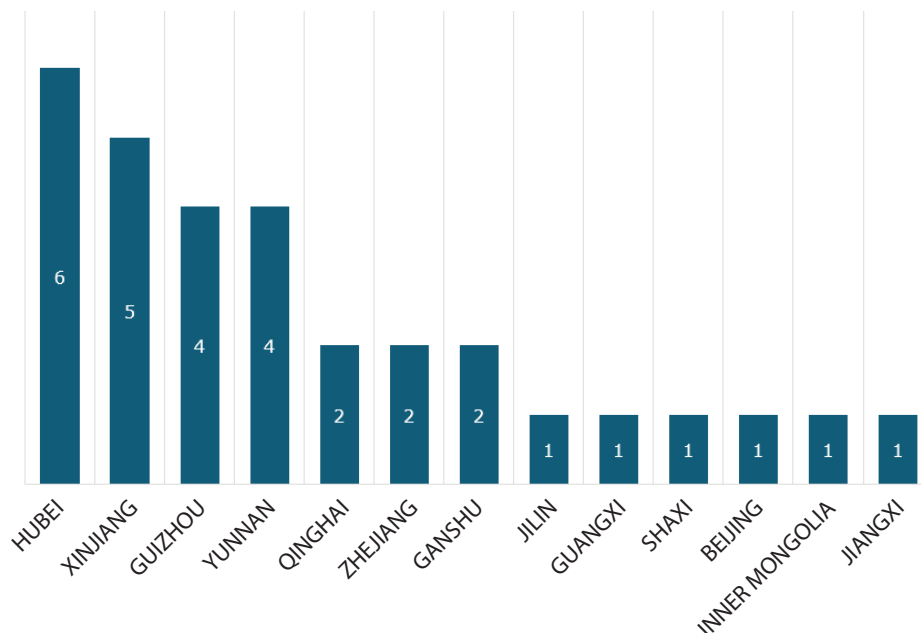


Figure 3 Geographical Distribution of the 32 Studies

respectively; Zhejiang, Qinghai and Gansu, two (2) papers respectively; and one from Guangxi, Shanxi, Jilin, Beijing and Inner Mongolia each.

Two aspects stood out in this corpus of study. Firstly, the paper distribution was uneven according to provinces or regions. The study of EFL among ethnic minority students in Xinjiang, Yunnan, and Guizhou have attracted some research interests. In contrast, research papers or reports regarding Guangxi and Inner Mongolia are relatively scarce. Since different ethnic groups live in different autonomous regions, Xinjiang is dominated by Uyghurs, and Zhuang dominates Guangxi. Therefore, the study of regional imbalances suggests that different ethnic groups receive extra attention from researchers. Secondly, the paper regional distribution statistics also indicate that scholars have conducted most studies in ethnic minority autonomous regions or some nationality universities in non-ethnic minority autonomous regions.

DISCUSSION

Based on the above findings, three issues on EFL among ethnic minorities in China still exist. The biased coverage of samples, the singularity and lack of triangulation of research methods, and the lack of broad and in-depth research outcome need to be further explored in future research on the topic.

Narrow Coverage on the Research Subjects

In terms of the education level of the research subjects, college (university) students and middle school students receive the most attention from researchers. In contrast, EFL at elementary and postgraduate education levels received minimal attention from researchers in China. This is probably because most researchers working in higher learning institutions need to meet their key performance index (KPI) on research. At the same time, school teachers are not accountable for research endeavors. As for the postgraduate education levels, the research interest on ethnic minority EFL learners might yet gain attention. It is thus recommended that the spectrum of participants could be extended to both ends in a future study, extending upward to the postgraduates and downward to the elementary pupils. In addition, in terms of ethnic distribution, most scholars (60%)

addressed ethnic minorities as a whole. Studies on single ethnic minorities account for only 24%. Studying several ethnic minorities (e.g., Xu, 2013) probably aimed to understand their general cultural distinctiveness and geographical distributions compared to the Han people, namely, the Chinese majority group. However, focus studies on single ethnic minorities are welcome as the differences among different ethnic minority groups could only be further examined. Finally, different ethnic groups received different levels of research attention. For example, the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the Mongolians in Inner Mongolia, and Tibetans in Tibet have received more attention. Still, the Zhuang and Miao people have received relatively low attention despite their large populations. Hence, more empirical research must fill the research gap in examining the EFL among the Zhuang minority students.

Singularity and Lack of Triangulation of Research Methods

In the field of English education for minority students, there is rare high-quality, wide-ranging, and systematic research (Shao, Wang & Li, 2019). Within this corpus of research publications, the proportion of adopting a single data collection method is high, 56% of these researches employed quantitative method, namely, data collection via merely a set of questionnaires, this research design was of some limitations, for example, their data are not fully triangulated. Therefore, their findings are undermined because Creswell and Creswell (2017) stated that a sole research tool adoption in the research design might affect the reliability of their findings, especially if the researcher suggests a generalisation of the research findings. "In the field of ethnic English education, if merely a single instrument involved, it is far from enough for conducting English education research in the background of multicultural ethnic areas" (Gao, 2014, p.132). Ideally, as a more scientific and rigorous practice, qualitative methods such as interviewing or observation can supplement the posited findings. Pitifully, the fact is that there are only 35% in 32 studies employed mixed-method research. In the future, to generate more convincing findings, a research method of mixed quantitative and qualitative recommended be employed in the study of English learning among Chinese ethnic minorities (Yuan, 2010).

Lack of Broad and In-depth Research Findings

Based on the literature review, the researchs' focuses are mainly: EFL learning strategies including speaking, writing, reading; teaching and learning difficulties; bilingual teaching including mother tongue and mandarin interference; and psychological cognition factors such as attitude, motivation, anxiety, self-efficacy, and so forth. There are identifiable research gaps that could be further addressed. Firstly, the researchers in the selected 32 studies have confined themselves to their respective academic fields, resulting in a situation in which interdisciplinary scenarios could not be cross-examined. The importance of cross-examination of research findings is one of the first gaps to be considered (Creswell & Creswell, 2017).

Secondly, most of these studies have only paid attention to the teaching and learning in the classroom settings with recommendations posed from teachers' perspective. These pedagogical research findings in themselves might not be sufficient to address the interests and concerns of policymakers or school administrators due to their limitations and delimitations of the respective study. Feedback from minority students, namely, the EFL learners, was important to research attention (Wen, 2014). Eventually, from the corpus of 32 studies conducted over the past ten years mainly focus on EFL learning as a whole, only a few studied selected EFL learning skill strategies, mostly related to listening and writing. Yet, no literature further explores related subskills.

For instance, in the not-so-popular researched areas such as speaking skills, sub-skills such as conversation, debate, public speaking, meeting, which are highly relevant for studies, have not been sufficiently explored (McCroskey, J. C., & Richmond, V. P. 1990). To date, the minority students' performance and learning strategies of these sub-skills are rarely being researched upon.

Besides, while the available 32 literature mainly focused on the teaching and learning aspects such as students' performance, learning strategies, motivation, self-efficacy, anxiety, and EFL teaching effectiveness. Yet, a broader perspective will be needed to call for more fundamental reform, for example, minority students EFL learning supporting policies from the government are underexplored. Customized EFL curriculum that is designed for ethnic minority students is also rarely

studied. The existing research has certain limitations, for example, the research scope is narrow, and the research depth is not enough. "Many factors that affect the English learning of ethnic minority students are worthy of in-depth research to understand better the characteristics of ethnic minority students' English learning" (Ma & Zhang, 2016, p.60).

Future research in the coming decade should consider these aspects as they are vital for the teaching and learning the EFL program by ethnic students. Besides, in-depth research on English education about ethnic minorities would require researchers from different educational fields to obtain first-hand raw data to answer research concerns concerning the specific research target groups. Therefore, future research direction may entail more researchers from cross-disciplinary perspectives in the EFL teaching and learning research projects.

CONCLUSION

This paper has addressed the research trends and focuses on EFL learning among ethnic minorities in China. The findings revealed that most studies in the last ten years merely focused on the classroom learning of the EFL program by ethnic minority university students, particularly students' performance, learning strategies, and various impacting factors. From the study, provinces such as Xinjiang, Yunnan, and Guizhou were given slightly more attention by researchers than other provinces in China. As for the selection of minority groups, researchers generally favored getting the samples from a mixed group or multiple ethnic minorities compared to a focused study on a single ethnic minority group. About the research instruments, questionnaires are the dominant tools in a couple of empirical studies. However, the research findings were subject to many limitations, including biased coverage of samples, singularity and lack of triangulation of research methods, and lack of broad and in-depth research outcome. This research paper hopes to shed light on the research gaps in EFL programs that engage the ethnic minorities in China. The paper also intends to spur more interest among researchers to reconsider the importance of researching the subject matter, considering its long-term impact on China's education milieu.

Last, as there are some limitations in this review, such as only examining one database, namely, the CNKI, due to the given rationale, only 32 articles are analyzed after two reliable researchers filtered all related articles. In future research, the papers in the international journals may be analysed along with the research works in China.

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