RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT OF EFL CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT RESEARCH IN CHINESE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

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Abstract: This review explores the development, current trends, and research prospects on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom environments in China. Drawing on an analysis of 45 studies published from 1985 to 2024, it summarizes key theoretical frameworks, major research themes, and methodological choices within the field. While significant advancements have been made, the review also uncovers notable gaps to be filled in this realm. By addressing existing challenges, it offers recommendations for a deeper understanding of Classroom Environment, and also improve practices in EFL classroom settings.
Keywords: EFL classroom environment; SLA; Foreign language education; Literature review

1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background Information

In recent years, the classroom environment for second language acquisition (SLA) has been a key topic being discussed on a global scale. As the natural L2 environment are difficult to create, the classroom plays a crucial role in enhancing L2 learners' language learning and acquisition. Focusing on classroom environment allows for a precise understanding of individual language development paths and an examination of the overall education system's effectiveness in promoting second language acquisition. Furthermore, by analyzing pedagogical choices, teacher-student interactions, and effective use of learning resources, the factors that truly enhance language acquisition and pinpoint areas in need of optimization can truly be identified. This research is vital not only for improving current classroom teaching but also for establishing a strong theoretical foundation and practical guidance for future innovation in second language acquisition education strategies. Therefore, a classroom environment that focuses on second language acquisition is essential for advancing language education and fostering comprehensive development in learners.

The traditional teacher-centered approach, which prioritizes the role of instructors and relies predominantly on lecturing, hampers students' initiative and the development of their practical language skills. This often leads to passive knowledge absorption and a dearth of opportunities for real-world language application, resulting in a gap between language learning and effective communication. Furthermore, the traditional pedagogy tends to overlook the individual differences among students, such as variations in learning motivation, style, and habits. A standardized teaching approach is not prone to effectively meet the diverse needs of all students, thereby impacting overall teaching efficacy.

With the evolution of pedagogical evolution and the rapid development of science and technology, there have been some advancements in teaching methods and resources in SLA classrooms in recent years, including the implementation of multimedia-assisted teaching and cooperative learning. However, there are still challenges to address. Particularly in non-native language environments, in which students lack abundant exposure to natural language input and struggle to create an output environment similar to that of native language acquisition. Additionally, there is still room for improvement in the breadth and depth of technology applications. The integration and utilization of advanced educational technologies like online learning platforms and intelligent teaching systems in second language acquisition classrooms are still in the nascent stages, not fully realizing their potential in personalized teaching, learning data analysis, and feedback.

1.2 Purpose and Significance

This literature review aims to comprehensively examine and analyze the historical evolution, current status, and future development of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom environment in China. Specifically, it seeks to elucidate key trends, gaps in knowledge, and emerging issues that have been shaped and continue to shape the research landscape in this field. The article will first provide a retrospective analysis of the development of EFL classroom environment research in China, tracing its evolution from early theoretical frameworks to contemporary empirical studies. Followed by this overview, it will critically evaluate the methodologies used in these studies, highlighting their strengths and limitations to inform future research designs. Next, the article will summarize the major findings and themes that have emerged across different investigations, focusing on the factors that contribute to positive or negative learning outcomes in EFL classrooms. Finally, it will identify gaps and controversies in the existing research, pointing out areas that require further explorations.

The significance of this literature review lies in its potential to contribute to both theoretical and practical advancements in EFL education in China. Theoretically speaking, it offers a comprehensive synthesis of existing research, facilitating the development of more nuanced and comprehensive frameworks for understanding the EFL classroom environment. By identifying gaps and controversies, it also points to new avenues for research that can enrich our understanding of this complex and dynamic field. Practically, for educators, especially for first-line EFL instructors, it provides insights into effective strategies for creating supportive and conducive learning environments that can enhance students' language acquisition and overall teaching effectiveness.

2 CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

2.1 Definitions of Classroom Environment

The concept of "classroom environment" has evolved over time, with scholars offering definitions from various theoretical and practical perspectives, reflecting its multidimensional nature.

Moos, in his research on environmental psychology, lays the groundwork by identifying three critical dimensions of environments: physical space, social interactions, and emotional climate. These dimensions were foundational to later educational research, particularly in studies of classroom environments, providing a framework for analyzing how environmental factors influence individual behavior and emotions. Bronfenbrenner further expands the understanding of classroom environments within his "ecological systems theory", describing them as dynamic ecosystems[1]. He emphasizes that classroom environments are not only related to students' cognitive and emotional factors, but also involve complex interactions between multiple elements, all of which contribute to students' academic success[1]. This theory provides a macro-level perspective, situating classroom environments within a broader context of human development.

With the development of information technology, Garrison and Kanuka introduce the concept of a "blended learning environment". They argue that classroom environments should not only incorporate traditional physical and social dimensions but also integrate digital elements to meet the evolving needs of modern learners. This perspective expands the definition of classroom environments, making them more adaptable to 21st-century educational practices.

Dorman et al. further refine the definition of classroom environment by describing it as the "physical, psychological, and social settings within and beyond the classroom", including teacher-student interactions, peer relationships, and the overall classroom atmosphere[2]. Their work emphasize how these factors directly impact students' learning behaviors and engagement, providing a more detailed operationalization of the concept[2].

Moving into the field of SLA, researchers begin to focus more specifically on the role of classroom environments. Peng and Woodrow approach classroom environments from an instructional perspective, defining them as comprising teacher support, student cohesiveness, and task orientation[3]. They underscore that supportive teachers, cooperative peers, and well-designed tasks are crucial conditions for creating a positive classroom environment that significantly impacts student motivation and learning outcomes. Similarly, Cao , in his study of willingness to communicate (WTC), defines classroom environment as "a set of immediate contextual factors that directly influence learners' WTC", including task types, interaction patterns, and the roles of interlocutors[4]. This definition highlights the direct impact of situational elements within the classroom environment on language learners' participation and language use.

Generally speaking, the evolution of the concept "classroom environment" encompasses perspectives from environmental psychology, ecological systems theory, blended learning environments, and the field of Second Language Acquisition (SLA). These definitions and theories offer both macro and micro perspectives for understanding classroom environments and guide educational practices and language teaching, particularly in creating positive learning environments and fostering student motivation and learning outcomes.

2.2 Previous Studies on EFL Classroom Environment

The classroom environment has consistently remained a significant topic in the field of EFL. Thereupon, this review synthesizes 45 studies involving the EFL classroom environment both domestically and internationally, spanning from 1985 to 2024. It is noteworthy that the period before 2018 goes through a relatively stagnant growth in the development of the research concerning EFL classroom environment, which witnesses a modest total of 24 studies. Nevertheless, when it comes to 2018, there exists a booming point where 6 articles related to EFL classroom environment are published, and researchers exhibit rising interest on the academic subject, leading to the emergence of 15 relevant studies from 2019 to 2024.

The studies synthesized in this paper are drawn from authoritative journals. As for the Chinese-language studies, they come from prominent publications such as Foreign Language Teaching and Research, Modern Foreign Languages, and Foreign Language Education. And the English-language studies are derived from notable scholarly journals, featuring Applied Linguistics, TESOL Quarterly and Studies in Second Language Acquisition. Therefore, reviewing these studies is of value as it offers a profile of the status quo of research on the EFL classroom environment, reflecting the depth and breadth of the scholarly discourse in this domain.

Among the 45 studies reviewed in this paper, there is a diversity in theoretical foundations, research contents, backgrounds and methodologies. In the subsequent sections, details that elaborate differences of the studies are provided.

2.2.1 Theoretical foundations

The studies encompassed in this paper are based on various theories. In the collection of articles, the most common theoretical basis is Second Language Acquisition (SLA), with 20 instances. Within the SLA framework, Stephen Krashen's Input Hypothesis is utilized in 8 articles, the affective filter hypothesis in 2 articles, and Merrill Swain's Output Hypothesis in 3 articles. Following these is the theoretical model of the Willingness to Communicate, with 9 articles. Additionally, theories like Sociocultural Theory and Ecological Systems Theory appear in 5 articles respectively, while Dynamic System Theory and Interaction Theory are discussed in 3 articles each. Other theories, such as Field Theory, Control-Value Theory, Systemic Functional Multimodal Discourse Analysis (SF-MDA) Theory, and Attribution Theory, are also employed but less frequently. Overall, the EFL classroom environment research has drawn from a variety of theories, yet it has predominantly leaned on SLA theories. Although other theories have been considered, their exploration has not been as in-depth, indicating a lack of depth in theoretical application.

2.2.2 Research contents

The selected studies are categorized into three types: empirical research, theoretical research, and literature reviews. Empirical research leads with 31 studies, representing 68.9% of the total. Following closely is theoretical research with 12 studies, constituting 26.7%, while literature reviews account for the remaining 4.4% with just 2 studies. The primary aspects of academic investigation concern the EFL classroom environment include the following. The interaction of classroom environment with academic performance is explored in six studies, and the impact of classroom environment on the willingness to communicate in a second language are investigated in seven studies. Two studies focus on the influence of classroom environment on academic emotions while four studies fix upon the effect of classroom environment on the development of language proficiency. Theoretical research draw on several issues representative of the construction and analysis of classroom environments in four studies and the impact of classroom environments on second language acquisition in another four studies. With respect to literature reviews, the main focus lies on the research methods pertaining to foreign language classroom environments.

While empirical research indeed provides valuable experiences for future studies, an imbalance in the number arises when compared to theoretical research and literature reviews. Moreover, in terms of empirical research, researchers predominantly examine classroom environment-related issues from the perspective of student perception, with fewer studies focusing on the perspective of teacher behaviors.

2.2.3 Research backgrounds and subjects

Research backgrounds are elaborated with an emphasis on empirical research, including details on research areas, categories of classroom environment, subjects' original languages, their foreign language (English) proficiency, and educational backgrounds.

As for areas where studies are taking place, a wide variety can be seen. China leads the way with 17 studies, and two studies are carried out in the United States and Iran distinctively, the United Kingdom, Cyprus, Spain, Japan, New Zealand, Germany, and Finland each producing one study. Moreover, there are two studies with no regions mentioned and one study covering a broad scope of regions including Asia, Europe, the Middle East, the Americas, and Africa, while no specific areas are indicated.

In terms of research subjects, multiple pieces of information are elaborated. First of all, the original languages that subjects speak vary a lot. In alignment with the regions where the studies are executed, all 17 studies in China feature research subjects with Chinese as their mother tongue. Also, because of the impact of minority groups, two studies carried out in the United States and one in Spain focus on Spanish as the native language. Finnish, Portuguese, and Persian are the original languages of research subjects as well, every amounting to two studies. Additionally, a few less prevalent languages like Romanian and Urdu are the original languages of subjects in certain studies. However, three studies are referring to no specific original languages. Generally, studies are characterized by a wide array of subjects' original languages, yet it is chiefly concentrated on Chinese speakers, which sets a barrier for future research in other languages. Concerning the research subjects' English proficiency, most studies lack relevant information while the English levels the rest indicate are not solid enough since there exists no standardized bar for evaluation. The educational backgrounds of the research subjects span from kindergarten to university. 17 studies mention that their subjects are university students, which take up the highest proportion, and 6 studies are featured with research subjects in high school. However, studies on those in elementary schools as well as preschoolers are significantly insufficient, totaling only three studies.

2.2.4 Research methodologies

Regarding research methodologies, this paper discusses aspects including the types of research methods, sample sizes, research instruments, and research designs. The types of research methods involved are quantitative research, qualitative research and mixed-methods research. Specifically, quantitative research is represented by 17 studies, qualitative research by 6 studies, and mixed-methods research is utilized by 8 studies. In terms of sample sizes, the smallest sample consists of only 2 individuals, while the largest sample reaches 5130 individuals, reflecting a significant numerical span. With respect to the research instruments, questionnaires are the most commonly-used tool, with 19 studies employing them. Interviews are also frequently adopted, with 8 studies taking advantages of this method. In addition, classroom observations, classroom recordings, tests, case analyses, data collection, informal conversations and reflective journals are methods selected by researchers in spite of their low frequencies. Regarding research design, 31 empirical studies encompass cross-sectional research, with 21 cross-sectional studies and 8 longitudinal studies, which range from a duration of 3 weeks to 21 months. Furthermore, there are 2 experimental studies.

Given that, the variety in research methods and wide range of sample sizes reflect a comprehensive exploration of classroom environments. The popularity of questionnaires and interviews highlights a balance between quantitative and qualitative data, while the less frequent use of methods like observations and journals indicates an area for expansion. This could provide a more detailed view of classroom dynamics. The combination of cross-sectional and longitudinal studies allows for both immediate and long-term educational insights, which is key for developing effective educational strategies. Overall, these approaches offer valuable insights into classroom environments, with implications for enhancing teaching practices and student outcomes.

3   LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

3.1 Theoretical Foundations

Current studies on EFL classroom environments often draw upon Second Language Acquisition (SLA) theories, such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis and Swain's Output Hypothesis, which are frequently cited in the literature. Although classroom environment is widely acknowledged as a vital component of language learning, it has rarely been examined as an independent research focus. Instead, it is commonly treated as a contextual factor that interacts with primary topics like willingness to communicate (WTC), motivation, and academic achievement. While this perspective has provided valuable insights into its role, the fundamental definition, structure, and autonomous mechanisms of classroom environments remain underexplored.

To bridge this gap, future research should position classroom environment as a primary area of investigation. Such studies could focus on its multifaceted nature, analyzing how various dimensions—such as physical, social, emotional, and digital factors—individually contribute to language learning. Incorporating interdisciplinary frameworks like Complexity Theory could further enhance our understanding by conceptualizing classroom environments as dynamic systems that shape learners' behaviors and outcomes across different contexts and over time. This shift in focus would promote a more comprehensive perspective on classroom environments, moving beyond simple correlations to uncover their underlying mechanisms and broader impacts.

3.2 Research Topics

Current research has primarily focused on the relationship between classroom environment and outcomes such as academic performance, WTC, emotional well-being, and language proficiency. However, much of the research has concentrated on surface-level correlations without thoroughly investigating the underlying mechanisms. For example, how do different dimensions of classroom environment (e.g., teacher support, student cohesion) interact to impact learning outcomes? This aspect remains underexplored, highlighting the need for future studies to investigate specific areas that address these gaps.

3.2.1 Mechanisms of classroom environment formation
Future studies should delve deeper into how the physical, social, and emotional dimensions of classroom environments interact to shape learning outcomes. Rather than viewing the classroom environment as a static backdrop, it should be approached as a dynamic system influenced by multiple factors. Research could examine the combined effects of teacher support, classroom atmosphere, student collaboration, and task design on student engagement and performance. These findings could offer practical guidance on optimizing teaching methods and fostering effective learning environments for language acquisition.

3.2.2 Integration of classroom environment and technology
As technology continues to transform education, the integration of digital tools into classroom environments has gained increasing attention. Future research could investigate how elements such as blended learning models, multimedia platforms, and online collaborative tools impact classroom interactions, student motivation, and language learning outcomes. By examining the role of these technologies in shaping classroom dynamics, researchers can provide strategies to enhance engagement and adapt classroom environments to meet the demands of modern learners.

3.2.3 Impact of different classroom tasks on the environment
The relationship between classroom tasks and the environment merits further exploration. Tasks such as listening exercises, speaking activities, writing assignments, and group discussions may elicit distinct emotional responses and levels of participation from students. Research could analyze how these tasks interact with classroom environments to influence student engagement and language production. By identifying these patterns, educators can design tasks and strategies tailored to optimize student outcomes in specific learning scenarios.

3.2.4 The influence of learner proficiency
Classroom environments may be perceived and experienced differently by learners with varying levels of proficiency. Future research should focus on how students at different stages of language development respond to diverse classroom settings. This work could inform the creation of personalized classroom environments that address the unique needs of learners at various proficiency levels, thereby supporting language growth across a broad spectrum of abilities.

3.2.5 Diversity in online learning environments
The growing prominence of online learning calls for a closer look at how digital classroom environments function. Research could explore diverse formats, such as MOOCs, interactive video lessons, and live-stream classes, and their impact on physical, social, and emotional aspects of learning. For instance, MOOCs often offer independent learning opportunities with minimal interaction, while live-stream lessons provide real-time engagement. Investigating how

these formats influence student motivation and learning outcomes could yield valuable insights for optimizing online education.

3.2.6 The role of native language similarity to English

The relationship between a learner's native language and English plays a crucial role in language acquisition. Languages with structural or lexical similarities to English, such as French or Spanish, may facilitate learning more easily than linguistically distant languages like Chinese or Arabic. Future research could examine how these differences affect learners' participation, motivation, and emotional engagement in the classroom. Such findings could help educators design more inclusive classroom strategies that address the needs of students from diverse linguistic backgrounds.

3.3 Research Context

Existing studies on classroom environment primarily focus on learners from China and English-language learning environments, but there is limited attention to other language and cultural contexts. Additionally, most studies concentrate on university-level students, with relatively little research involving learners from other educational stages such as primary or vocational education. Furthermore, many studies lack standardized descriptions of participants' language proficiency levels, which limits the generalizability of their findings. Future research should consider broadening the geographical and linguistic scope.

3.3.1 Expanding research regions

Future studies should move beyond a focus on learners in China and include participants from a broader range of countries, particularly those involved in the "Belt and Road" initiative. Including diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds would enable meaningful cross-cultural comparisons and deepen our understanding of how classroom environments differ across various contexts.

3.3.2 Exploring the influence of native language similarity

The influence of learners' native language on second language acquisition deserves further exploration. Future research could investigate how similarities between native languages and English affect learning processes and outcomes. Additionally, studies could analyze the impact of using learners' native language in the classroom, particularly for students from different linguistic backgrounds to better tailor teaching strategies.

3.3.3 Addressing learner's language proficiency

The role of classroom environment in shaping language acquisition may vary depending on learners' language proficiency. Future research should focus on how different aspects of the environment influence beginners and advanced learners. This includes examining emotional responses, participation, and learning behaviors, which may differ significantly across proficiency levels.

3.3.4 Broadening Educational Levels

Most existing studies concentrate on university students, leaving gaps in our understanding of other educational settings. Future research should investigate learners in primary, secondary, and vocational education to examine how classroom environments function in different contexts and among learners of various age groups. This would provide a more comprehensive view of how classroom environments support language learning across the educational spectrum.

3.4 Research Methods

Currently, research on EFL classroom environments mostly relies on quantitative methods, particularly cross-sectional studies. Although these studies provide valuable insights, they often fail to capture the evolving nature of classroom environments and their long-term impact on students' learning processes. Future research can benefit from several improvements.

3.4.1 Increasing the use of experimental studies

Experimental studies offer a valuable approach to uncovering causal relationships between classroom environments and learning outcomes. By providing concrete evidence, such research can inform strategies for optimizing both teaching methods and classroom settings to better support student learning.

3.4.2 Strengthening longitudinal research

Longitudinal research is crucial for examining how classroom environments evolve over time and how these changes influence students' language acquisition and learning behaviors. Such studies can also shed light on the sustained impact of classroom environments on learners' academic performance and overall development.

3.4.3 Diversifying research tools

Future studies should adopt diverse and innovative research tools to capture real-time data and improve ecological validity. Methods like experience sampling, eye-tracking, and biofeedback can offer deeper insights into the interplay between classroom environments and students' emotions, behaviors, and learning experiences. These approaches would enable researchers to gain a more comprehensive understanding of how environmental factors shape learning processes.

4   CONCLUSION

This literature review has examined research on English as a Foreign Language (EFL) classroom environments, focusing on both their historical development and potential future directions. The discussion began with an overview of classroom environment research, highlighting its importance in second language acquisition (SLA). Subsequent

sections explored definitions and theoretical underpinnings of classroom environment, summarizing key studies across various methodological approaches and cultural contexts. The review also investigated how classroom environments influence student outcomes, emphasizing the dynamic and evolving nature of this research area. Lastly, attention was given to emerging themes in EFL classroom environment studies, such as the role of technology, task-based learning, and the effects of learner proficiency and native language backgrounds.

To conclude, while significant progress has been made in understanding the role of classroom environment in SLA, many areas remain underexplored. Future studies should give greater attention to classroom environment as a central research theme, delving into its interactions with individual learner factors and integrating the potential of new technologies. Moreover, there is a need to expand the scope of research beyond traditional classroom settings, incorporating online learning environments, digital platforms, and multimodal approaches. Such efforts will better reflect the evolving nature of education and provide deeper insights into how classroom environments shape learners' motivation, engagement, and language acquisition outcomes across diverse learning contexts.

COMPETING INTERESTS

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