

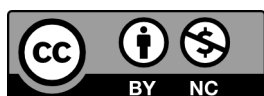
A Study on the Pathways to Enhancing Research Literacy of University Foreign Language Teachers in Ethnic Regions

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Abstract: Research literacy is a critical dimension of the professional development of university foreign language teachers. However, teachers in these regions encounter distinct challenges in their academic development. Employing a grounded theory approach, this study conducted in-depth interviews with five university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions. The findings reveal that the enhancement of research literacy among this teacher cohort is synergistically driven by three pathways: personal construction, academic community interaction, and external empowerment. This study offers a preliminary exploratory framework based on a pilot study of five representative cases. It provides directional references for the development of the research literacy of university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions and provides empirical insights for relevant institutions and authorities to formulate supportive policies.

Keywords: Ethnic Regions; University Foreign Language Teachers; Research Literacy; Pathways to Enhancement



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1 Introduction

Teachers are the primary resource for educational development (Editorial Group, 2020), and building a high-quality and professional teaching staff is a fundamental guarantee for enhancing the quality of higher education (Yao & Wang, 2025). In the context of accelerating the construction of China into a country strong in education, university foreign language teachers are entrusted with the dual roles of educators and knowledge creators. Their research literacy is not only crucial for individual academic growth and career development but also profoundly impacts the theoretical innovation and practical reform of foreign language education. Zhang and Xu (2024) pointed out that teachers with

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research literacy are able to employ appropriate methods to investigate phenomena and issues related to their discipline or teaching practice, thereby fostering a positive interaction between teaching and research. Xu and Yang (2024) further emphasized that teaching research literacy is the core driving force for the continuous innovation and development of foreign language education. Therefore, enhancing the research literacy of university foreign language teachers is both an inherent requirement for building a high-quality specialized teaching force and an inevitable choice in response to the demands of foreign language education reform in the new era.

In recent years, scholarly research on teacher research literacy has been relatively extensive. In terms of definition, researchers commonly delineate research literacy into four dimensions: research awareness, research knowledge, research skills, and research ethics. Zhang and Xu (2024) incorporated research literacy into the framework of foreign language teacher professional competence, emphasizing that the connotation of research literacy is richer than research ability alone, also encompassing values, knowledge, and character. Regarding the practical challenges in developing teachers' research literacy, existing studies have primarily identified constraints at three levels. Externally, the most salient conflict arises from the tension between heavy pedagogical and administrative burdens and the resulting lack of dedicated research time, coupled with a lack of expert guidance and research resources (Zhang et al., 2025; Wang, 2022). At the individual teacher level, foreign language teachers generally lack confidence in their own research literacy and exhibit significant deficiencies in research knowledge and skills (Zhang et al., 2025). At the institutional and cultural level, an organizational climate that prioritizes teaching over research, utilitarian research motivations, and evaluation mechanisms dominated by quantitative metrics further hinder teachers' research engagement and sustained development (Gui, 2024; Wang, 2022; Gao & Ren, 2009).

To address these challenges, researchers have generally proposed enhancement pathways from individual, institutional, and policy perspectives. At the individual level, it is emphasized that teachers should enhance their research consciousness, foster a lifelong learning attitude, and cultivate problem awareness and research skills through teaching reflection methods such as action research and lesson study (Gui, 2024). At the institutional level, the focus is on creating a collaborative and supportive research culture, establishing research mentorship systems, improving research incentive mechanisms, building platforms for expert guidance, and providing teachers with knowledge, experience, and emotional support through "research guidance communities" (Li & Xu, 2024). At the policy level, it is suggested that education authorities should refine teacher research training systems, add research project categories closely related to teaching practice, and appropriately allocate research resources towards young teachers and less developed regions (Gao & Ren, 2009; Wang, 2012).

While existing findings have laid the foundation for this study, their subjects have predominantly been middle school teachers, teachers in developed eastern regions, or the national level overall, with very limited attention paid to university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions. These teachers are at the forefront of talent cultivation and discipline construction, facing explicit research responsibilities and academic output requirements. However, the universities in ethnic regions, constrained by economic and historical factors, have long been in a disadvantaged position within the higher education system and suffer from relatively inadequate research conditions (Lan et al., 2024; Zhang & Xie, 2025). These institutions are also entrusted with the special mission of contributing to regional economic and social development and fostering ethnic unity and progress (Zhang & Xie, 2025; Liu, 2025). The challenges these teachers face in developing their research literacy are more complex, yet rarely addressed specifically. Therefore, this study focuses on university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions, employing in-depth interviews to explore

the authentic pathways through which this group enhances its research literacy. The aim is to enrich the theoretical landscape of teacher research literacy research and provide practical references for the professional development of foreign language teachers in these regions.

2 Research Design

2.1 Participants

This study focuses on exploring the authentic experiences and perceptions of university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions regarding the pathways to enhancing their research literacy. To this end, the authors employed a purposive sampling strategy and selected five university teachers as in-depth interview participants. All participating teachers are currently employed at universities in ethnic regions. The group comprises three professors, one associate professor, and one lecturer, all holding doctoral degrees, with teaching experience in tertiary foreign language education ranging from 5 to 21 years. The research interests of the five teachers cover diverse areas, including British literature, cognitive linguistics, Western drama and local opera, quantitative research in foreign language education, and the intersection of artificial intelligence (AI) and minority ethnic languages. Their academic credentials and publication records exhibit a clear gradient, ranging from provincial philosophy and social science planning projects, publications in top-tier to core journals, and from academic monographs to translated works and textbooks. Given that this investigation aims to explore the authentic experiences of teachers with rich research backgrounds, this sample structure demonstrates strong typicality in terms of professional rank, academic seniority, and regional context, thereby providing rich and diverse information relevant to the research questions.

2.2 Instruments

This study employed a semi-structured interview protocol as its core research instrument. The interview guide was developed based on a literature review and theoretical presuppositions. Following multiple rounds of revision and discussion within the research team, and after soliciting feedback from an expert in qualitative research (a professor of education) to refine the clarity, openness, and logical flow of the questions, a final version was established. The development of this interview guide adhered to the fundamental principles of qualitative research, namely openness, exploration, and flexibility. It was structured around four core modules aligned with the research aims: 1) Self-perception of research literacy: to understand participants' interpretations of the construct of research literacy and their self-assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses in this area; 2) Retrospective review of research development: to trace significant experiences in their research journey and identify the key contributing factors; 3) Contextual challenges in ethnic regions: to investigate the specific dilemmas faced by university foreign language teachers in these regions regarding their research development; 4) Pathways for enhancing research literacy: to gather participants' expectations and practical suggestions for improving research literacy enhancement strategies.

2.3 Research Procedure

Prior to the formal interviews, the researchers communicated with the participants regarding the interview

arrangements. Subsequently, one-on-one online interviews were conducted, with each session lasting between 45 and 60 minutes. The interview guide served as the foundation, while flexible probing questions were posed based on each participant's individual research experience. Simultaneously, the interviews were audio-recorded, and a transcription feature was used to generate an initial draft. Following the interviews, the transcribed texts were manually verified and corrected. The five participating teachers were then assigned anonymous codes (A, B, C, D, and E), and sensitive information such as their institutions and geographic locations was removed. This process concluded the organization of the raw data, resulting in a corpus of interview texts for subsequent analysis.

The analysis of the interview data employed the procedural three-level coding method of grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), which includes open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. To maintain focus on the core research question, this study extracted only the textual content directly related to the pathways to enhancing research literacy for coding analysis. Information regarding participants' background, perceptions of research literacy, developmental experiences, and the contextual research challenges in the region was utilized as supplementary analytical material and was not included in the core coding process. The specific coding procedure is detailed below.

2.3.1 Open Coding

Open coding constitutes the first level of coding and serves as the initial step in data analysis. The researchers read the interview texts line by line and sentence by sentence, adopting an open approach to code the original statements. Through this process, numerous concepts were identified. Following repeated comparisons and the consolidation of similar concepts, these were further synthesized into initial categories. This process required the researchers to suspend their own presuppositions as much as possible and to employ the respondents' own language to name the concepts (Chen, 2000). This phase ultimately yielded 47 initial categories.

2.3.2 Axial Coding

Axial coding constitutes the second level of coding, built upon the foundation of open coding. The researchers repeatedly compared and reflected upon the relationships among the initial categories, merging and consolidating similar codes. This process ultimately distilled seven higher-level main categories: activation of intrinsic motivation, autonomous building of self-capacity, academic community interaction, guarantee of institutional conditions, policy support, integration of industry and education, and exploitation of regional characteristics.

Table 1 Examples of Open and Axial Coding

Original Statement	Initial Concept	Initial Category	Main Category
Intrinsic drive, curiosity, and the desire for knowledge are always the primary driving force	Intrinsic drive, curiosity, desire for knowledge	Intrinsic research motivation	Activation of intrinsic motivation
I write every day, producing one to two thousand words. During holidays, apart from the two or three days around the New Year, I usually spend all my time on research	Persistence, long-term commitment, time accumulation	Research perseverance and persistence	
I specialize in Western drama and Chinese local opera research. This focus is my strength	Long-term deep engagement in a research area, gradual extension, systematic thinking	Systematic deep engagement and extension	
The ability to use tools, especially AI tools, is essential nowadays... The speed of adaptation and response to these tools is crucial	Learning to use and adapt to AI tools; learning from institutional training and self-study; using various research tools and AI applications	Learning to apply AI tools	Autonomous building of self-capacity

Continued

Original Statement	Initial Concept	Initial Category	Main Category
Organized research definitely requires a team. Finding like-minded people to work with not only alleviates loneliness but also generates more inspiration and intellectual collisions, making it easier to produce results	Organized efforts, like-minded research team, collaboration and mutual assistance	Collaboration of research teams	Academic community interaction
I have long participated in academic organization activities, such as the China-U.S. Poetry and Poetics Association. Through journal reviewing, academic conferences, and other means, I continuously engage with cutting-edge developments in the field, constantly refining my research methods through exchanges with domestic peers	Participation in academic conferences, continuous engagement with disciplinary frontiers, optimizing research methods through peer exchange	Participation in academic conferences	
I believe we can recruit or rehire retired disciplinary leaders to establish stable research teams. Using a “mentorship” model, we can organize collective lesson planning, grant proposal polishing, paper revision, and other activities to help early-career teachers get started quickly. Additionally, we should regularly invite well-known domestic experts to provide guidance on grant applications and research methodology training, as well as organize internal pre-reviews for high-level projects like the National Social Science Fund of the People’s Republic of China (NSSFPRC)	Mentoring to support early-career teachers; regular expert training	Establishing supportive research teams and mentorship systems within institutions	Guarantee of institutional conditions
For example, various incentive measures can be adopted, such as rewarding researchers for their output and providing them with more time. From the institution’s perspective, these approaches can also contribute to the enhancement of researchers’ competence	Adopting various incentives, rewarding research output	Establishing institutional research incentive policies	Policy support
I believe that special quotas for ethnic regions should be established in provincial and national research grant applications, with appropriately lowered application thresholds and prioritized funding support for foreign language discipline projects in these regions	Establishing special quotas for ethnic regions, prioritized funding support	Establishing special quotas for ethnic regions	
I think we should promote “pairing assistance” relationships between strong foreign language institutions in the East and universities in ethnic regions. Through scholar exchanges, joint project applications, and co-building research centers, we can facilitate the cross-regional flow of high-quality research resources	Mutual assistance between Eastern and ethnic region institutions; cross-regional flow of quality resources	Promoting cross-regional pairing assistance and resource flow	
I believe integration of industry and education, or teachers deepening cooperation with enterprises, is crucial for understanding market trends and demands, especially given the rapid iteration of AI technology... There are training resources, particularly those combining industry and practice, that deserve more consideration	Integration of industry and education, deep cooperation with enterprises, understanding market trends and demands	Deep university-industry collaboration	Integration of industry and education
Proposing needs from the bottom up, or deriving them from the real world... Identifying pain points in industrial practice and then elevating them into research questions is also an excellent path	Deriving research questions from practice	Practice-oriented research questions	Exploitation of regional characteristics
We have recently been building an ASEAN corpus, which is a significant advantage for foreign language teachers, especially those teaching less commonly taught ASEAN languages	Leveraging regional characteristics (ASEAN corpus)	ASEAN-specific research resources and tools	
I don’t think being in an ethnic region is a disadvantage. It can also be an advantage because these areas have unique conditions... For example, in my case, studying local opera, Guangxi is also an ethnic region. It has operas like Guiju opera, Zhuang opera, Caidiao opera, which may not be found elsewhere. So, being in this region actually helps with our research	Guiju opera, Zhuangju opera, Caidiaoju opera; uniqueness to the region; helpful for research	Exploiting unique cultural resources of ethnic regions to establish differentiated research strengths	

2.3.3 Selective Coding

Selective coding constitutes the third level of coding and represents the final integrative phase of interview data analysis. The researchers aimed to distill a core category that could unify the entire analysis from all the main categories, systematically organizing the logical relationships among them around this core to form a coherent “storyline”. This study extracted the core category “Pathways to Enhancing Research Literacy of University Teachers in Ethnic Regions”, further refining the main categories derived from axial coding into three core dimensions: personal construction, academic community interaction, and external empowerment. The storyline can be articulated as follows: The enhancement of research literacy among university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions is synergistically driven by three pathways: personal construction, academic community interaction, and external empowerment. Personal construction includes the activation of intrinsic motivation and the autonomous building of self-capacity, addressing the questions of “whether one wants to do research” and “whether one knows how to do research”; it serves as the fundamental driving force for improvement. Academic community interaction encompasses aspects such as participation in academic conferences and visiting scholarship programs, guidance of supervisors and experts, and collaboration of research teams, addressing the question of “with whom to do research”; it acts as the key catalyst for cognitive expansion. External empowerment covers guarantee of institutional conditions, policy support, integration of industry and education, and the exploitation of regional characteristics, addressing the questions of “whether there are conditions and opportunities to do research”; it provides the important guarantee for sustained improvement. These three pathways are mutually reinforcing, complementary, and interconnected, collectively constituting an integrated system for enhancing the research literacy of university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions. Based on these findings, a theoretical model diagram of the pathways to enhancing research literacy was constructed, as illustrated in Figure 1.

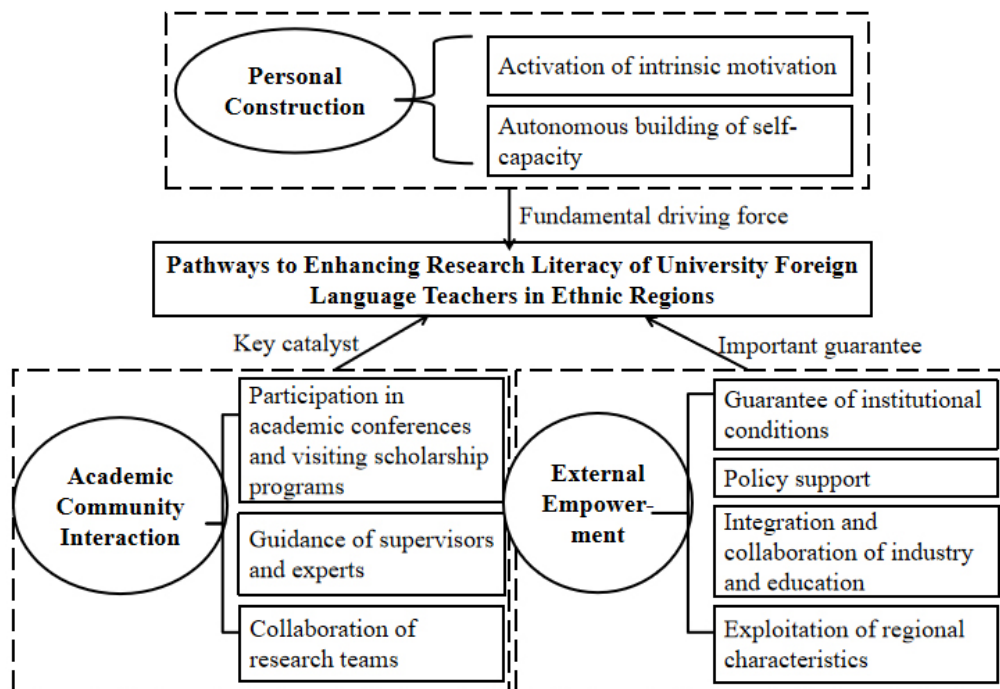


Figure 1 Theoretical Model of Pathways to Enhancing Research Literacy of University Foreign Language Teachers in Ethnic Regions

3 Results and Analysis

Based on the three-level coding results derived from grounded theory, personal construction, academic community interaction, and external empowerment collectively constitute the pathways to enhancing the research literacy of university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions. The following sections elaborate on and analyze each of these three pathways.

3.1 Personal Construction as the Fundamental Driving Force for Enhancing Research Literacy

Personal construction encompasses two dimensions: the activation of intrinsic motivation and the autonomous building of self-capacity. It refers to the accumulation of motivational energy and the development of competencies that teachers accomplish through their own efforts. In the research growth narratives of the five participating teachers, personal construction consistently occupied a foundational position. It serves as the bedrock upon which teachers can take their first steps in research and continue to advance even in the absence of external support.

3.1.1 Activation of Intrinsic Motivation

The activation of intrinsic motivation refers to the psychological energy that drives teachers to sustain their devotion to research. The research motivation of the participating teachers did not originate from external incentives such as professional title evaluations or material rewards, but rather from intrinsic academic interest and enduring passion.

First, academic interest serves as the primary driving force. The participating teachers generally regarded academic interest as the foremost impetus on their research journey.

“Intrinsic drive, curiosity, and the desire for knowledge are always the primary driving force. Without them, I wouldn’t be able to persevere afterwards.” (Teacher E)

“The most critical thing is to have this interest and hobby. I want to do research, I want to achieve results. Once you have this mindset, it’s easy to naturally reach out and find various ways to improve yourself.” (Teacher B)

From these teachers’ statements, it is evident that interest plays a crucial role throughout the process of enhancing research literacy. According to Self-Determination Theory, this interest-based intrinsic motivation originates from an individual’s fundamental psychological need for autonomy, that is, intrinsic motivation is fully activated only when individuals perceive their actions as stemming from self-will rather than external control (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Ryan & Deci, 2017). For university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions, where external resources and incentives are relatively scarce, autonomy-driven motivation based on interest is particularly valuable. It not only constitutes the fundamental support for teachers’ sustained and deep engagement but also serves as the internal guarantee for the functioning of the entire enhancement pathway. Therefore, enhancing teachers’ research literacy necessitates attention to the stimulation of academic interest and the satisfaction of autonomy-related psychological needs.

Second, long-term persistence and self-imposed standards serve as safeguards. The participating teachers emphasized that improving research literacy requires the accumulation of time and consistent, sustained investment.

“I write every day, producing one to two thousand words. During holidays, apart from the two or three days around the New Year, I spend all my time on research.” (Teacher A)

“Persistence is key, and output is not achieved overnight. You must be able to ponder a topic for a year or two. Doing research is different from other things, for it requires a significant investment of time. I basically revise every article ten times. Without ten revisions, I won’t submit it. When you revise it to the point where you are satisfied, and it moves you, it will naturally move others.” (Teacher B)

Besides, some participating teachers mentioned some specific challenges in their institutions. Teacher A noted that “in developed regions, you have more opportunities to connect with leading scholars, whereas our research platforms and resources still lag behind top-tier universities.” Teacher E further noted that “to some extent, research in this area still feels a bit like fighting alone,” and “no particularly stable partners for research collaboration.” Under these conditions, it is difficult for teachers to rely on external forces for research quality control; instead, they must internalize standards and take control into their own hands, managing their time independently to conduct research. This set of self-imposed requirements, originating from within the individual, compensates to some extent for the deficiencies of the external support system.

Furthermore, the activation of teachers’ research motivation does not originate entirely from intrinsic interest; external pressure also plays an initiating role. Teacher D mentioned that the increasing demands and intensely competitive environment within the higher education sector compel her to take action. This type of externally driven impetus, stemming from institutional pressure, although lacking the sustainability of interest-driven motivation, nevertheless promotes teachers’ research activities to a certain extent and creates conditions for the gradual cultivation of research interest and competence.

Third, embracing tasks with a positive mindset and growing through action. It is noteworthy that the participating teachers generally regarded accepting tasks as an opportunity for research literacy growth rather than an additional burden.

“I downloaded over 100 articles related to metaphor online. Only after reading them carefully did I understand what metaphor is, what experts are studying, what the framework of a paper is, how to write an abstract, and how to develop the main body.” (Teacher B)

He further advised: “When supervisors or leaders assign tasks, we must not complain. We should try to accept them and strive to complete them. This is a very good opportunity for self-improvement.”

Teacher A also emphasized the particular importance of mindset when facing the unknown in research. The reason why “embracing new things” and “accepting tasks” can become opportunities for growth for these teachers lies in the fact that they create opportunities for learning by doing. When faced with unfamiliar tasks, teachers often lack relevant knowledge and experience, but the time constraints and outcome-oriented nature of the tasks compel them to learn quickly and act immediately. This approach—accepting with a positive attitude and learning while doing—enables teachers to naturally acquire the necessary methods and abilities through action. When teachers in ethnic region institutions lack systematic training opportunities, rather than waiting until everything is fully prepared, it is more beneficial to treat the tasks at hand as learning arenas. Each task constitutes a micro-action learning experience, through which teachers accumulate methods, expand cognition, and build confidence in the process of completion.

3.1.2 Autonomous Building of Self-Capacity

Autonomous building of self-capacity refers to the process through which teachers actively build the methodological system and cognitive framework that supports their research activities via deliberate actions and

strategic learning in their research practice. It constitutes the critical link for transforming intrinsic motivation into sustained academic output.

First, it involves cultivating scientific planning awareness and time management skills. Without scientific planning, teachers' time and energy can easily be dispersed by routine tasks, rendering research investment fragmented and inefficient, thus making competence enhancement unattainable. During the interviews, Teacher E remarked, "In the past, I did research more based on interest, going wherever it took me. Now, I make more explicit systematic plans, extending the timeline to three to five years." Teacher C suggested, "There is no need to aim for national-level projects from the very beginning. One can start with smaller university- or municipal-level projects and accumulate achievements gradually." If scientific planning addresses the directional question of "where to go", then time management addresses the question of "how to keep moving forward." Teacher B, who spoke from personal experience, noted, "Time is really squeezed out. Write a little every day, and small amounts accumulate. Eventually, papers and monographs take shape." Teacher C provided a time management method: "Given heavy teaching loads, one can adopt the Pomodoro Technique, setting aside a fixed block of one to two hours each day for research to avoid time fragmentation." From these teachers' experiences, it is evident that planning can translate vague research motivation into systematic and clear research actions, while time management ensures that this plan can be implemented in the midst of daily routines, enabling the continuous accumulation of research literacy.

Second, strengthening problem awareness and mastering research methods. Problem awareness is the starting point of research, determining its direction and value. Four of the participating teachers identified problem awareness as the foremost element of research literacy. They believe that identifying genuine problems and posing good questions requires alignment with the needs of the nation, society, and education, as well as continuous refinement from daily teaching and one's own research field. Research literacy embodies a methodological consciousness—when encountering a problem, one must select the most appropriate method to address it, while the mastery of these methods can, in turn, help teachers uncover deeper issues. One teacher suggested expanding methodological horizons through interdisciplinary research and exploration of new tools, and that teachers can master and adapt to AI tools through formal training or self-study. Currently, foreign language disciplines are undergoing a transformation towards interdisciplinary and digital approaches. University foreign language teachers in ethnic regions who proactively embrace methodological changes can not only compensate for informational and resource disadvantages but also leverage new tools to open up new research spaces within their traditional areas of strength.

Third, tracking disciplinary frontiers and enhancing academic expression. Research requires both obtaining external information to nourish problem awareness and refining academic expression through writing. Several participating teachers regarded literature reading and expert tracking as fundamental research skills. They stay informed about disciplinary developments by regularly perusing core journals and grasp research strands through continuous tracking of key experts. One teacher also emphasized the importance of interdisciplinary reading, arguing that extensive reading helps break through the limitations of a single disciplinary perspective, providing more diverse theoretical resources and analytical angles for research. In terms of writing, several teachers stressed that academic expression requires repeated refinement—continuously polishing logic and language across various types of writing and gradually developing one's own academic expression style by emulating the writing approaches and frameworks of high-level experts. Whether it is literature reading, expert tracking, or writing refinement, this is essentially a cyclical and recursive interaction, a process through which teachers achieve academic growth by maintaining a dialogue with the disciplinary frontier.

Fourth, focusing on deep engagement and systematic extension of research areas. Several participating teachers commonly emphasized the importance of focusing on and deeply engaging with a specific research direction. Teacher A has specialized in Western drama research since his master's studies, never changing direction for 19 years, thereby establishing significant academic influence in the domestic drama research field. Teacher B, with cognitive linguistics as the central axis, has extended research outward in layers, forming a series of systematic outputs. This strategy of focusing on a core domain without rigidly adhering to a single object ensures both deep accumulation in research and avoids the limitation of a narrow perspective, enabling teachers to achieve systematic academic accumulation under constraints of limited time and energy. For teachers in ethnic region institutions, the value of focus is even more pronounced. While they cannot compete with their counterparts in Eastern institutions through team size or platform resources, they can gain academic recognition through differentiated accumulation.

3.2 Academic Community Interaction as the Key Catalyst for Enhancing Research Literacy

Academic community interaction refers to the process through which teachers achieve breakthroughs in research cognition and acquire methods through interpersonal academic engagement. Coding analysis revealed that the critical junctures in the participating teachers' research development were almost all closely associated with the academic community, including supervisors, peers, experts, and team members. The mechanisms of this interaction can be categorized into three aspects: participation in academic conferences and visiting scholarship programs, guidance of supervisors and experts, and collaboration of research teams.

Actively participating in academic conferences and academic visiting fellowships constitutes an important channel for teachers to step beyond their own institutions and engage with the broader academic sphere. One participant compared academic conferences to "intellectual catalysts", while underscoring the necessity of rigorous preparation, such as researching the areas of expertise of presenting scholars in advance, engaging in targeted learning, and subsequently channeling the acquired inspiration and knowledge into one's own research. Other teachers maintained continuous engagement with cutting-edge developments through participation in academic organizations and journal reviewing, constantly refining their research methods through exchanges with peers; their overseas visiting experiences also enabled direct exposure to international frontiers, thereby broadening their research horizons. Conversely, some teachers corroborated the value of academic exchange from a different angle, noting that in ethnic regions, opportunities for high-level academic conferences and face-to-face interactions with leading scholars are relatively scarce, which can easily constrain perspectives and methodologies. For these teachers, proactively breaking through geographical limitations to enter a broader academic dialogue space and clarifying the positioning and shortcomings of their own research through peer interaction represents a critical pathway for enhancing their research literacy.

Actively seeking the guidance of supervisors and experts serves as a crucial impetus for teachers to transcend cognitive limitations. This form of guidance continues to exert influence in research practice even after entering the profession. One teacher mentioned, "After finalizing a topic, I would discuss it with my supervisor and senior fellow students; the supervisor's guidance made my thinking much clearer." Another teacher attributed significant improvement in research literacy to expert guidance, noting that experts' review comments on topic selection and grant proposals continuously helped identify blind spots and refine direction. Consequently, the value of mentors and experts lies not only in knowledge transmission but also in providing an academic mirror through which teachers can examine their work from a review perspective, uncovering problems they could not detect themselves. This form of external

professional scrutiny is particularly precious in the relatively closed academic environment of institutions in ethnic regions.

Collaboration of research teams represents the most routine form of academic community interaction. It establishes a regular platform for exchange among teachers, facilitating the sharing of experiences and complementarity of thinking. It helps satisfy basic psychological needs such as relatedness and competence. Through sustained intellectual exchange, experience sharing, and mutual inspiration, teachers can learn from each other's strengths, effectively promoting the steady enhancement of their research literacy. During the interviews, multiple teachers emphasized the value of research teams. Teacher B noted, "Research must not be done in isolation. Finding like-minded people to work with not only alleviates loneliness but also makes it easier to produce results through intellectual exchange." Teacher D regarded the academic group formed by doctoral classmates as the greatest contributor to her research growth, as team members came from different disciplines with complementary research paradigms, and long-term discussions expanded each other's methodological horizons. Teacher E's experience revealed the unique value of informal academic interactions. She mentioned that long-term exchanges with partners sharing common interests exposed her to cognitive perspectives beyond her own discipline. These non-utilitarian interactions, characterized by their depth and continuity, exerted a more profound cognitive influence on the enhancement of her research literacy.

These diverse forms of academic exchange can help university teachers in ethnic regions overcome geographical and resource constraints, compensate for deficiencies in research thinking and methodology, and steadily enhance their research capabilities. Concurrently, a favorable atmosphere of academic interaction can effectively mobilize teachers' research motivation, alleviate the predicament of isolated and insular research, continuously stimulate teachers' research interest and exploratory drive, and provide robust support for teachers to sustain their research endeavors and achieve steady improvement in research literacy.

3.3 External Empowerment as an Important Guarantee for Enhancing Research Literacy

External empowerment refers to the conditions and opportunities provided by the external environment in which teachers are situated, encompassing four dimensions: guarantee of institutional conditions, policy support, integration of industry and education, and exploitation of regional characteristics.

3.3.1 Guarantee of Institutional Conditions

Guarantee of institutional conditions refers to the financial support, time guarantees, evaluation mechanisms, and resource platforms that employing institutions provide for teachers' research. The interviewed teachers generally believed that if institutions could offer certain conditional guarantees, it would lower the thresholds and reduce the obstacles for teachers to engage in research. However, the actual situation was not optimistic. Regarding funding, Teacher E mentioned that the university's financial support was limited, and funding issues directly affected her capacity to conduct research related to digitalization. She also further revealed the practical impact of time constraints from the perspective of early-career teachers, pointing out that the heavy burden of lesson preparation during the first three years of employment severely compressed research time, and she expressed hope that the university could provide newly hired teachers with more developmental space. Concerning support mechanisms, Teacher D noted that her academic support relied primarily on doctoral classmates, with a lack of effective organizational support within her college. Faced with these difficulties, the participating teachers put forward various improvement suggestions. Regarding time guarantees,

they suggested that teaching loads could be reduced by supplementing faculty, and that teachers engaged in research projects could be granted appropriate reductions in teaching hours. Concerning support mechanisms, they proposed that retired disciplinary leaders could be recruited or rehired to mentor early-career teachers through a “mentoring” model, while experts could be regularly invited to provide guidance on grant applications and research methodology training. Regarding evaluation, they expressed the expectation that incentive measures could be adopted to reward research output, that monolithic evaluation criteria could be adjusted, and that outcomes such as the translation of ethnic culture and local foreign-language services could be incorporated into the assessment system, making the evaluation more flexibly reflect teachers’ actual contributions. In the participating teachers’ view, ideal institutional support should not be limited to the provision of funding and time, but should also encompass the broader cultivation of a conducive research environment, and they similarly hoped that the surrounding industrial and professional development environment would complement such efforts.

3.3.2 Policy Support

Policy support refers to the institutional preferences provided by higher-level authorities over universities in ethnic regions in areas such as research project quotas, resource flow, pairing assistance, and training funds. The suggestions that the participating teachers directed toward government departments were concentrated in four areas. First, they recommended establishing special quotas for ethnic regions, appropriately lowering application thresholds, and providing prioritized funding support for foreign language discipline projects. Second, regarding resource flow, they called for “pairing assistance” between leading foreign language universities in the East and their counterparts in ethnic regions to facilitate the cross-regional flow of high-quality research resources through scholar exchanges, joint project applications, and collaborative research centers. Third, they suggested establishing special talent development funds to support foreign language teachers in ethnic regions in visiting top domestic universities and participating in international academic exchanges to broaden their academic horizons. From the expectations expressed by these teachers, it is evident that policy support is important because it can break down the structural barriers faced by teachers in ethnic regions at the institutional level. Special quotas lower the competitive threshold for project applications, pairing assistance opens channels for resource flow, and the improvement of evaluation criteria has broken the single-dimensional logic that places disproportionate weight on papers and projects. These institutional designs can effectively compensate for the inherent disadvantages that teachers in ethnic regions face in resource acquisition, reducing the extent to which they are disadvantaged in competition with their counterparts in the East due to geographical factors.

3.3.3 Integration of Industry and Education

Integration of industry and education refers to the process through which teachers, via deep cooperation with the industrial sector, identify research problems and acquire research resources from authentic practice. One teacher noted that deriving research questions from industrial practice represents a path worth exploring. Traditional research pathways often identify research gaps from literature, whereas the integration of industry and education pathway starts from real-world problems, moving research from the study to the field. For institutions in ethnic regions, this pathway holds particular significance. Although academic resources in ethnic regions are relatively limited, they often possess unique industrial ecosystems and cultural resources, which can be transformed into sources of differentiated research topics. When teachers direct their attention to the industrial practices around them, they not only gain access to vivid research materials but also become more likely to produce outcomes that hold practical value for local development.

3.3.4 Exploitation of Regional Characteristics

The essence of exploitation of regional characteristics lies in a differentiated research strategy, through which teachers leverage the unique cultural resources, linguistic resources, and locational advantages of ethnic regions to transform geographical limitations into research strengths. One teacher, using her own research as an example, pointed out that ethnic regions possess cultural resources that are unavailable elsewhere, such as Guangxi's Gui Opera, Zhuang Opera, and Caidiao Operas, which can precisely serve as unique research subjects. Another teacher mentioned that the development of regionally distinctive research resources, such as the ASEAN multilingual corpus, represents a significant advantage for foreign language teachers. In terms of topic selection, teachers can move beyond the homogenized competition of traditional pure literature and linguistics research, conducting studies centered on localized themes. These directions not only align with national strategic orientations but also enable the formation of individual research characteristics.

In addition to exploring local resources internally, some teachers also emphasized the importance of learning from external sources. They suggested that theories and experiences that have already generated outcomes in developed regions can likewise be drawn upon by ethnic regions. When new theories guide local practice, results will naturally follow. This implies that regional characteristics research is not closed but rather involves the transfer and application of established external theoretical frameworks to the specific contexts of ethnic regions, seeking differentiated entry points through adaptation. Therefore, university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions need not blindly pursue research progress comparable to that of developed regions; they can also adopt a distinctive research approach that plays to their strengths while minimizing their weaknesses, turning regional characteristics into research assets. In serving regional development, they can achieve enhancement of their own research literacy and are likely to develop irreplaceable competitiveness.

4 Conclusion

This study employed grounded theory methodology to systematically explore the pathways to enhancing the research literacy of university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions. The findings reveal that the enhancement of teachers' research literacy is not the result of a single factor, but rather a dynamic process synergistically driven by three pathways: personal construction, academic community interaction, and external empowerment. These three pathways are mutually reinforcing and hierarchically supportive. Personal construction requires teachers to take academic interest and the desire for knowledge as the starting point of intrinsic motivation, to accumulate academic competence through long-term persistence and self-imposed standards, and to embrace tasks with a positive mindset, growing through action. At the same time, they need to develop scientific planning and time management skills, strengthen problem awareness and methodological competence, and stay attuned to disciplinary frontiers while refining their academic writing, and ultimately form systematic scholarly accumulation through focused and sustained engagement. Academic community interaction requires teachers to actively participate in academic conferences and visiting scholarship programs, leverage the guidance of supervisors and experts to transcend cognitive limitations, and achieve resource sharing and intellectual stimulation through collaboration of research teams. External empowerment requires institutions and higher-level authorities to provide guarantees of institutional conditions in terms of funding support, time guarantees, evaluation

optimization, special quotas, and pairing assistance, while also promoting the integration of industry and education and the exploitation of regional characteristics. It is noteworthy that regardless of how comprehensive external conditions may be, whether they can ultimately be translated into tangible enhancement of teachers' research literacy depends on teachers' own active initiation and effective utilization. It is hoped that through multi-party collaboration in the future, the research support system for university foreign language teachers in ethnic regions can be further improved. While optimizing external safeguards, it is essential to activate teachers' intrinsic motivation, expand channels for academic community interaction, and promote the overall enhancement of their research literacy, thereby better serving the high-quality development of foreign language education in ethnic regions.

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