

Research on the Status Quo and Improvement of Language Proficiency for International Talents in Xinjiang Universities in the Context of Core Area Development

Xiaoling Liu^{1*}, Maoqiong Liu²

¹Xinjiang University of Finance and Economics, Urumqi 830012, Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, China

²Qiongtai Normal University, Haikou 571100, Hainan Province, China

*Corresponding author: Xiaoling Liu, mysarah_8@163.com

Copyright: © 2024 Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (CC BY 4.0), permitting distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is cited.

Abstract: There is an urgent need for international talents proficient in one or two foreign languages in Xinjiang, driven by efforts to transform Xinjiang's unique geographical advantages into developmental advantages. This demand places greater responsibility on colleges and universities in Xinjiang. This paper examines the current status of students' proficiency in English or Russian through questionnaires and explores suggestions for improving their language skills based on interviews. Countermeasures and recommendations are proposed to enhance students' language proficiency in Xinjiang's higher education institutions, supporting the development of the Silk Road Economic Belt's core area and the Xinjiang Pilot Free Trade Zone, thereby contributing to Xinjiang's high-level opening up and high-quality development.

Keywords: Xinjiang; International talents; Language proficiency; Status quo; Improvement

Online publication: November 13, 2024

1. Introduction

In recent years, the concept of "international talent" has garnered attention across various sectors in China as a highly contemporary idea. Language is a key pathway for talent to become "internationalized," and this process inevitably involves foreign languages, which require solid foreign language skills. Enhancing the foreign language proficiency of international talents is a critical mission for foreign language teaching in Chinese universities.

Xinjiang is a crucial hub in the core area of the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and has emerged as a front-runner in China's efforts to open up to the outside world, fully integrating into the process of economic globalization. On November 1, 2023, the China (Xinjiang) Free Trade Zone was officially unveiled as the first free trade zone in the northwest border region. The region's opening up and development urgently demand international talents who possess a global perspective, proficiency in foreign languages, and the ability to

integrate into foreign cultures and engage in cross-cultural communication. Therefore, enhancing the language proficiency of international talents in Xinjiang—while confronting the current state of their language abilities—represents a significant challenge for foreign language teaching in universities in the region.

2. Research background

There are 21 undergraduate universities in Xinjiang, offering courses in English, Russian, Japanese, and Arabic ^[1]. English is offered at every university with the largest number of students, while Russian is taught in most universities with a considerable student population. Japanese is only available at Xinjiang University and Xinjiang Normal University, with a smaller number of students. Arabic is exclusively offered at Shihezi University, with less than 100 students. English and Russian are the primary foreign languages studied by students in Xinjiang universities.

Domestic research on language proficiency has a history of nearly 30 years, where “language proficiency” often refers to native language proficiency or national common language proficiency. Currently, some studies focus on national language proficiency, which concerns a country’s ability to meet specific language demands, including foreign language proficiency ^[2]. However, more research has emerged focusing on individual language proficiency. With the advancement of economic globalization, studies often revolve around English language proficiency among university students. Since 2017, numerous studies have analyzed university students’ English language proficiency by referencing the China Standards of English Language Ability, highlighting the significant attention given to English language proficiency as an international language by domestic experts and scholars ^[3-6].

Although research on the language proficiency of various ethnic groups in Xinjiang has been conducted over the past 10 years, the number of studies remains limited. A search using “language proficiency” and “Xinjiang” as titles or keywords on China Journal Net yields only 17 documents. These studies primarily focus on the national common language proficiency of ethnic minorities in Xinjiang, with research participants typically being ethnic minority residents, teachers, or students. Only two studies address the English language proficiency of preparatory students from ethnic minority universities and Kazakh university students in Xinjiang, while one document explores the English for Specific Purposes (ESP) language proficiency of finance and economics graduate students in Xinjiang universities ^[7-9]. Currently, there is no research specifically addressing the language proficiency of university students in Xinjiang, nor studies focusing on the foreign language proficiency of international talents in Xinjiang universities.

This study aims to understand the English or Russian language proficiency of students from seven universities in Xinjiang through self-evaluation. The objective is to identify the difficulties and issues in foreign language teaching in Xinjiang universities, propose countermeasures and suggestions for improving the language proficiency of international talents in Xinjiang universities, and provide recommendations for the top-level design of foreign language teaching in Xinjiang universities.

3. Research methods

3.1. Research subjects

This study employed a combination of literature review, questionnaire survey, interview, qualitative and quantitative research methods. The survey was conducted among a total of 2,888 students (2,411 English

language students and 477 Russian language students) from seven universities in Xinjiang, including Xinjiang University of Finance and Economics, Xinjiang University, Xinjiang Normal University, Shihezi University, Xinjiang Medical University, Xinjiang Institute of Technology, and Xinjiang Arts University. The participants included undergraduates, graduates, and recent graduates from majors such as international trade, international business, international finance, international communication, international certified accounting, international economic law, English, and Russian (as shown in **Table 1**, **Figure 1**, and **Figure 2**). Additionally, interviews were conducted with a total of 186 individuals, including 81 university students, 67 university teachers and educational administrators, and 38 government, enterprise, and institutional management staff and employees (as shown in **Table 2** and **Figure 3**). The interviews aimed to understand the English and Russian language proficiency of university students and solicit suggestions on improving international language proficiency.

Table 1. Basic information about the survey subjects

	Fresh graduates (person)							Previous graduates	Total number (person)
	Undergraduate students				Graduate students				
	Freshman	Sophomore Year	Junior Year	Senior Year	First year research	Second year research	Third year research		
English	418 17.34%	797 33.06%	532 22.07%	108 4.48%	335 13.89%	94 3.9%	22 0.91%		
	1855				451			105	2411
Russian	76 15.93%	148 31.03%	136 28.51%	22 4.61%	14 2.94%	3 0.63%	3 0.63%		
	382				20			75	477

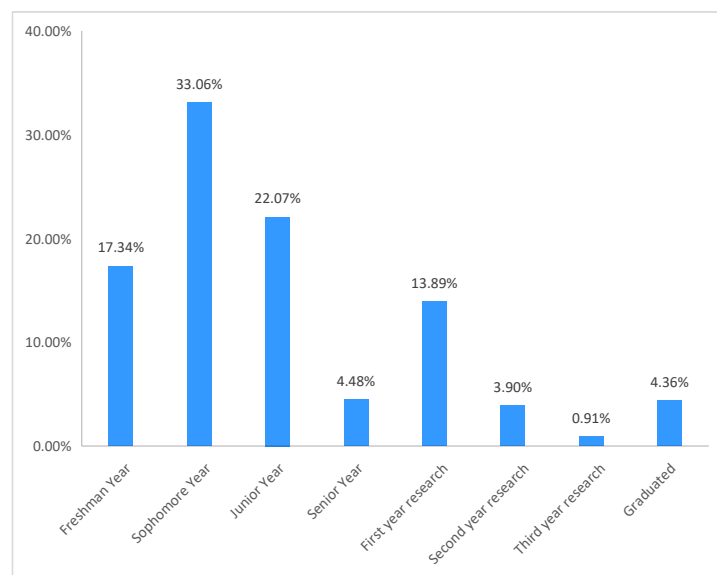


Figure 1. The proportion of English language students

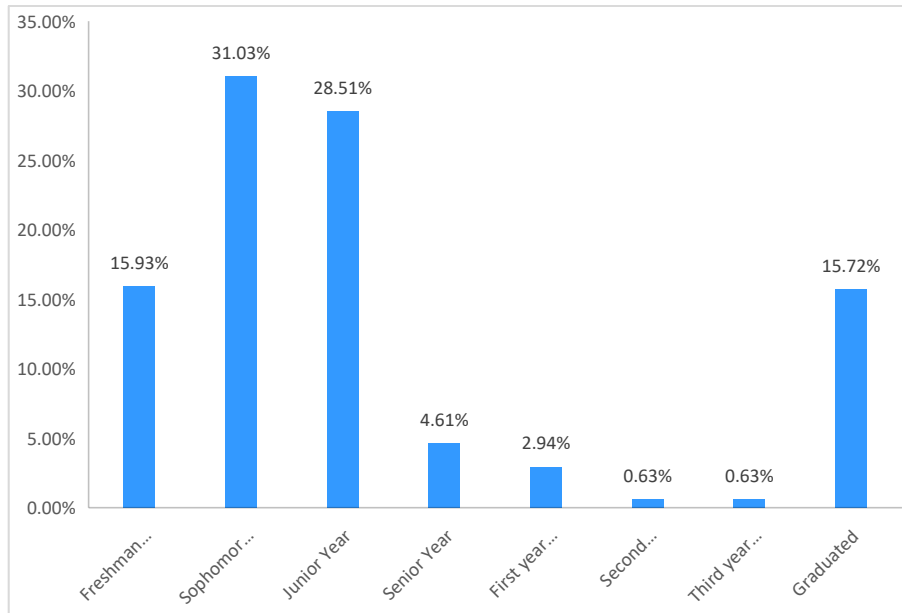


Figure 2. The proportion of Russian language students

As shown in **Table 1**, **Figure 1**, and **Figure 2**, the survey subjects involved undergraduate and graduate students of all grades and all previous years. The questionnaire data can illustrate the current status of foreign language proficiency of college students in Xinjiang.

Table 2. Basic information of interviewees

	Students	Enterprises	Teachers and educational experts	Total
Russian	23	13	9	45
English	58	25	58	141
Total	81	38	67	186

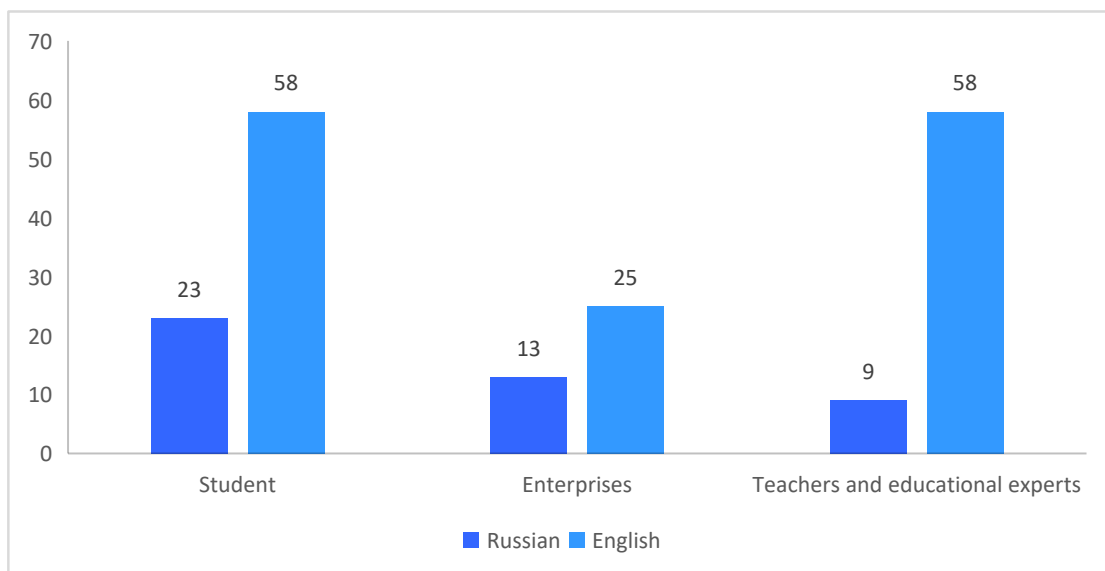


Figure 3. Basic information of English and Russian interview subjects

As shown in **Table 2** and **Figure 3**, the interviewees are not only university teachers and students but also include education experts and employers. The interview data is objective and comprehensive.

The seven universities in Xinjiang selected for this study include two key universities under the “Double First-Class” and “211 Project” initiatives, while the others are universities specializing in finance and economics, education, medicine, and the arts. The eight majors selected for this study are representative of those designed to cultivate international talent, and the language abilities of students in these majors are likewise indicative. Therefore, the results of this study can reflect the current state of language abilities among international talent at universities in Xinjiang.

3.2. Research tools

This study applies an online questionnaire survey using the “Self-Evaluation Scale” from “China’s Standards of English Language Ability” (hereinafter referred to as the “Scale”) ^[10]. The “Scale” is designed for language learners and users to assess or diagnose their own English proficiency levels. It includes self-evaluations of various aspects such as knowledge of language components and their application, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, oral expression, written expression, pragmatic ability, interpretation skills, and translation skills. Although the “Scale” is developed based on the English language, languages share commonalities. Just as the “Common European Framework of Reference for Languages” is not limited to a specific language, the theoretical framework and development methods of the “Scale” can be applied to the development of proficiency scales for other languages.

Based on the research hypothesis, this study uses a five-point scale. The questionnaire includes self-evaluations from the “Self-Evaluation Scale” covering aspects such as knowledge of language components and their application, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, oral expression, written expression, pragmatic ability, interpretation, and translation skills. It employs a five-point Likert scale, where “1” represents “completely disagree” and “5” represents “completely agree.” Before conducting the survey, the research team conducted a pilot test, analyzed the results statistically, and revised the questionnaire based on the analysis to ensure its reliability and validity.

For the interview component, a combination of qualitative research and quantitative analysis was adopted. Semi-structured interviews were conducted face-to-face, via online video, and through voice calls. Each interviewee’s responses were recorded, and with their consent, select portions of the interviews were audio-recorded.

3.3. Data collection and description

To understand the current situation of language proficiency among international talents in Xinjiang universities, the research team distributed two survey questionnaires. Questionnaire 1 was the “Self-Evaluation Scale for English Language Proficiency of International Talents,” and Questionnaire 2 was the “Self-Evaluation Scale for Russian Language Proficiency of International Talents.” 2,411 students completed and returned Questionnaire 1, while 477 students completed and returned Questionnaire 2. Both questionnaires were subjected to reliability tests.

Data analysis was conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS 22.0) statistical software, following these steps:

- (1) Reliability analysis (as shown in **Table 3**). The Cronbach’s alpha coefficient for Questionnaire 1 was

0.972, and the Cronbach's alpha coefficient for Questionnaire 2 was 0.978. Both Cronbach's alpha coefficients were higher than 0.9, indicating high reliability of the data

- (2) Descriptive data analysis was used to evaluate the self-assessment results, including eight individual skills and the overall level (represented by the mean value of all items).

Table 3. Reliability test of two questionnaires

Questionnaire type	Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
Questionnaire 1	0.972	29
Questionnaire 2	0.978	37

After analysis, the research team determined that if a student can achieve 70% of the descriptors for a particular language proficiency level, they are considered to have reached that level ^[11]. On the Likert five-point scale, the lowest self-evaluation score is "1" (completely disagree), and the highest is "5" (completely agree). According to the 70% criterion, a self-evaluation score of 3.5 or above for a particular level indicates that the student has achieved that level.

The research team collected and collated 186 interview records, with a recovery efficiency of 99.46%. All qualitative data and audio recordings were transcribed into text, coded, and further analyzed.

3.4. Research results and analysis

3.4.1. Questionnaire results and analysis

The research team aggregated and processed the self-evaluation scores for the eight abilities, including knowledge of language components and their application, and overall self-evaluation, dividing them into five levels. These levels are represented by numbers 1 to 5, which indicate the students' overall self-evaluation performance in each section. The higher the number, the better the performance. Descriptive statistics were then conducted in this section.

Table 4. Language proficiency self-assessment descriptive statistics (English)

Languages	Average	Median	Majority	Standard deviation
Ability to apply knowledge	3.30	3.00	3.00	0.76
Listening comprehension skills	3.11	3.00	3.00	0.82
Reading comprehension skills	3.25	3.00	3.00	0.78
Oral communication skills	3.22	3.00	3.00	0.82
Written communication skills	3.04	3.00	3.00	0.86
Application ability	3.16	3.00	3.00	0.88
Interpretation skills	3.06	3.00	3.00	0.86
Translation skills	3.13	3.00	3.00	0.82
Overall self-evaluation	3.33	3.00	3.00	0.87

Table 5. Language proficiency self-assessment descriptive statistics (Russian)

Languages	Average	Median	Majority	Standard deviation
Ability to apply knowledge	3.51	4.00	4.00	0.79
Listening comprehension skills	3.39	3.00	3.00	0.85
Reading comprehension skills	3.55	4.00	4.00	0.79
Oral communication skills	3.42	3.00	4.00	0.79
Written communication skills	3.43	4.00	4.00	0.81
Application ability	3.54	4.00	4.00	0.86
Overall self-evaluation	3.63	4.00	4.00	0.88

Table 4 and **Table 5** show that the average scores of students participating in the questionnaire survey range from 3.04 to 3.30 for English and from 3.42 to 3.55 for Russian. The standard deviations are between 0.76 and 0.88, indicating a relatively small degree of dispersion and limited variation in the scores among students. None of the students' English language abilities have reached the designated level, while their Russian language abilities are slightly better. Specifically, their proficiency in language components, application, reading comprehension, and pragmatic use have met the required level for Russian. The mode and median of students' self-evaluation scores for English language ability are both 3, whereas for Russian, they are 3 or 4. This suggests that, despite the overall deficiency in language proficiency, students' Russian language skills are better than their English language skills.

Pie chart of frequency distribution of overall self evaluation scores

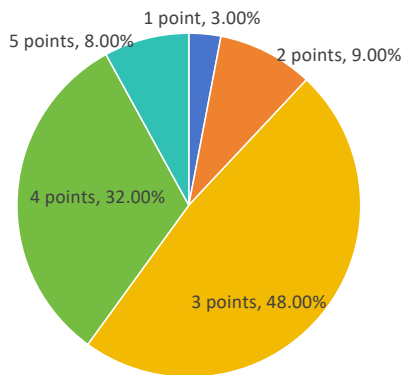


Figure 4. Frequency distribution of overall self-assessment scores (English)

Pie chart of frequency distribution of overall self-evaluation scores

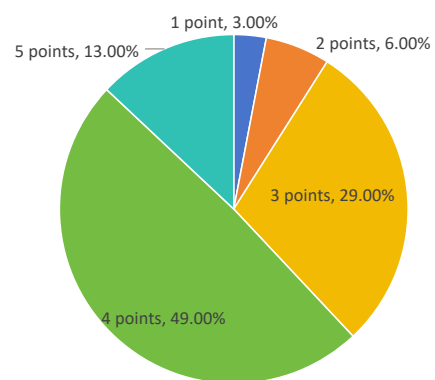


Figure 5. Frequency distribution of overall self-assessment scores (Russian)

Table 3 and **Table 4**, along with **Figure 4** and **Figure 5**, indicate that the average self-evaluation scores for students' English and Russian language abilities are 3.33 and 3.63, respectively. The median and mode for English are both 3, while those for Russian are both 4. These results suggest that students' English language ability is average, whereas their Russian language ability is slightly better.

3.4.2. Interview results and analysis

The research team interviewed 186 individuals to solicit suggestions on how to improve the international language proficiency of students in Xinjiang universities. After data aggregation and categorical analysis, it

was found that the suggestions mainly focused on practical teaching, teacher training, curriculum reform, and school-enterprise cooperation (as shown in **Figure 6**).

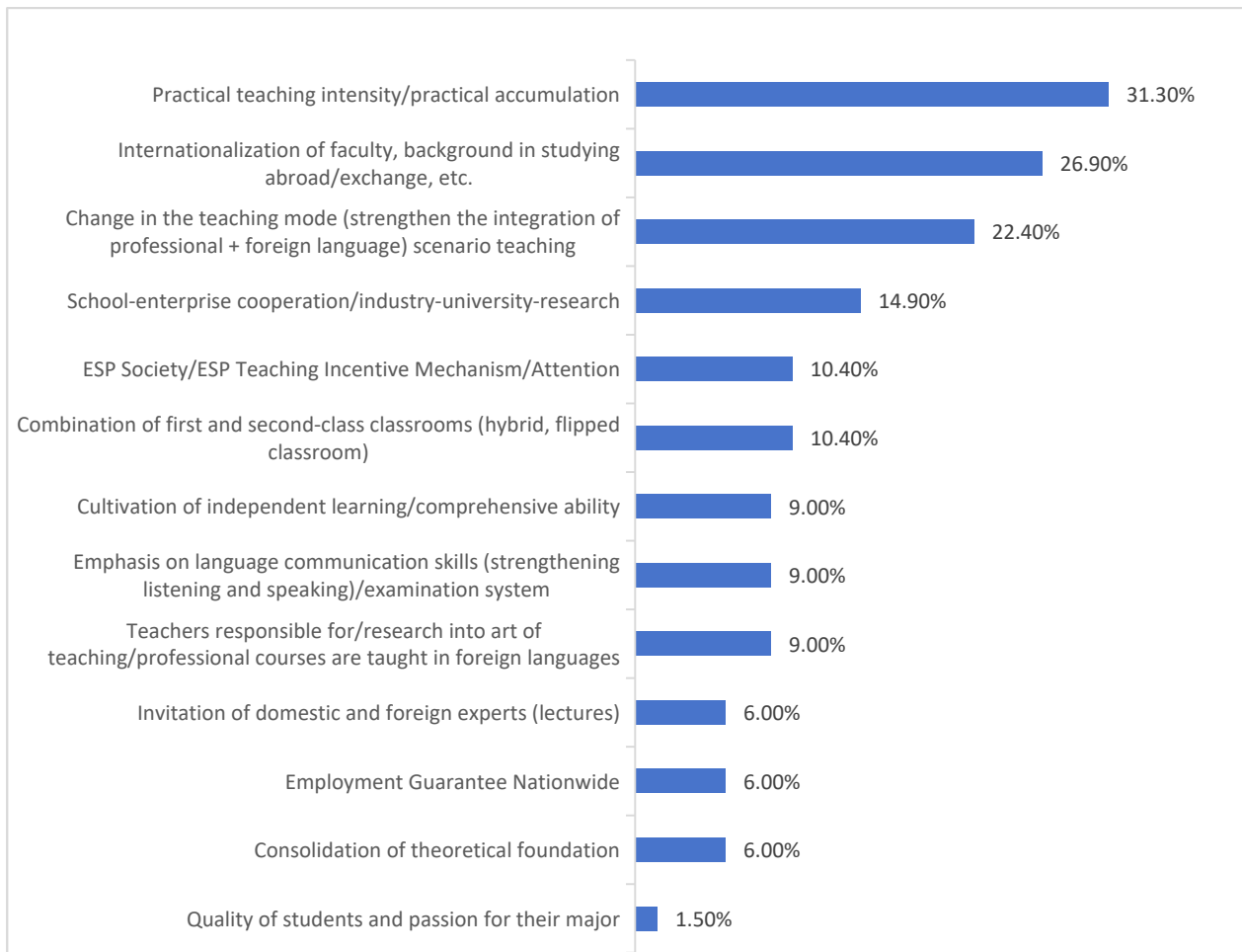


Figure 6. Interview suggestion ratio chart

4. Research on the path to improve the language ability of international talents in Xinjiang Universities

Based on the results of questionnaires and interviews, it is urgent to improve the language proficiency of international talents in Xinjiang universities. This can be achieved through five aspects: curriculum system, practical teaching, international cooperation, evaluation system, and teaching staff construction.

4.1. Optimizing the curriculum system and training objectives

- (1) Optimizing training objectives: Clarify the training objectives for the language proficiency of international talents, focusing not only on the mastery of language knowledge but also emphasizing language application skills and cross-cultural communication skills, to cultivate compound talents suitable for international exchanges.
- (2) Promoting curriculum reform: Strengthen the construction of basic foreign language courses to provide students with a solid language foundation. Introduce interdisciplinary courses such as

international trade, law, etc., combined with language learning, to cultivate students' language application skills in professional fields.

4.2. Strengthening practical teaching and language environment construction

- (1) Enriching practical teaching activities: Organize students to participate in international exchanges, overseas study tours, volunteer services, and other activities to provide real-life language application scenarios. Conduct simulated international conferences, business negotiations, diplomatic negotiations, and other activities to improve students' practical language skills.
- (2) Creating a good language environment: Utilize campus radio, television, internet, and other resources to broadcast foreign language programs and provide foreign language learning materials. Hold foreign language corners, foreign language speeches, reading, and writing competitions to stimulate students' interest in language learning.

4.3. Promoting international cooperation and exchange

- (1) Strengthening cooperation with international universities: Establish cooperative relationships with foreign universities to carry out activities such as student exchanges, teacher visits, and joint training. Introduce high-quality educational resources from abroad, such as textbooks, courses, and teaching methods, to improve teaching quality.
- (2) Expanding cooperation with international enterprises: Cooperate with foreign companies to carry out internships, employment guidance, and other activities to provide more practical opportunities for students. Customize training programs based on corporate needs to cultivate international talents with the language skills required by enterprises.

4.4. Improving the evaluation system and incentive mechanism

- (1) Establishing a scientific evaluation system: Adopt multiple evaluation methods, such as oral tests, writing assessments, translation assignments, and cross-cultural communication skills tests, to comprehensively evaluate students' language proficiency.
- (2) Setting up scholarship and incentive mechanisms: Reward students who excel in language learning and international exchanges. Establish a special fund to support students' participation in international competitions, exchange activities, and many more.

4.5. Strengthening the construction of teaching staff

Strengthen teaching staff by improving teachers' language skills. Encourage teachers to participate in domestic and international language training and academic exchange activities to enhance their language proficiency and teaching level. Introduce teachers with overseas study or work experience to enhance the international background of the teaching team.

5. Conclusion

Xinjiang urgently needs international talents who are proficient in foreign languages, and foreign language teaching in Xinjiang universities has an unshirkable responsibility to address this challenge. Through questionnaire surveys conducted among students majoring in English, international trade, and other related

fields at seven universities in Xinjiang, as well as interviews with students, teachers, and employers, the research team assessed the current situation and identified existing problems regarding English and Russian language proficiency among international talents in Xinjiang universities. Based on these findings, the team proposed effective strategies to improve language proficiency from five key areas, including the optimization of the curriculum system. These efforts are expected to cultivate more talents with an international perspective and cross-cultural communication skills, support the development of the core area of the “Silk Road Economic Belt,” promote the growth of the Xinjiang Free Trade Zone, and provide strong support for Xinjiang’s high-level opening-up and high-quality development.

Funding

This paper is a phased achievement of the National Social Science Fund project “Research on Improving the Language Ability of International Talents in Xinjiang Universities under the New Open Pattern” (Project No. 21XY015), the Ministry of Education’s Industry-University Cooperation and Collaborative Education Project “Teaching Reform Strategies for Business English Courses Based on Hybrid Teaching Mode” (Project No. 231007269042357), and the Teaching Reform Project of Xinjiang University of Finance and Economics “Research on the Cultivating Mode of Featured Talents in Business English Major in Xinjiang Universities Guided by OBE Concept” (Project No. 2024JG01).

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] University Student Essentials Website, 2024, Which Universities Offer Undergraduate Programs in Xinjiang in 2024? A Complete List of All Undergraduate Universities in Xinjiang (21 Universities). Published June 21, 2024. <https://www.dxsbb.com/news/50300.html>
- [2] Wen Q, 2022, International Communication Ability, National Discourse Ability, and National Language Ability — With a Discussion on the “Two-Wheel Drive” Strategy for Cultivating International Communication Talents. *Journal of Hebei University (Philosophy and Social Science Edition)*, 2022(03): 17–23.
- [3] Liu J, 2017, China’s Standards of English Language Ability and English Learning. *Foreign Languages in China*, 2017(06): 4–11.
- [4] Liu J, 2019, China’s Standards of English Language Ability and English Teaching. *Foreign Language World*, 2019(03): 7–14.
- [5] Wang S, 2018, The Application of China’s Standards of English Language Ability in College English Teaching. *Foreign Language Education*, 2018(04): 1–4.
- [6] Zhao Wen, Wang H, 2020, Constructing University English Language Ability in the New Era. *Foreign Language World*, 2020(04): 19–27.
- [7] Zhao Jingwan, Xia W, 2018, Investigation on the Current Situation of English Language Ability and Intercultural Communication Competence of Xinjiang Ethnic Minority Preparatory Students. *Journal of Inner Mongolia Normal University (Education Science Edition)*, 2018(01): 97–105.

- [8] Yan X, 2013, Investigation on Language Attitudes and Language Abilities of Kazakh, Chinese, and English among Kazakh University Students in Xinjiang. *Journal of Ili Normal University*, 2013(03): 17–21.
- [9] Bali H, Liu M, 2023, Exploring Pathways to Improve ESP Language Abilities of Postgraduate Students in Finance and Economics — Taking Xinjiang Universities as an Example. *Foreign Economic Relations and Trade*, 2023(05): 64–67.
- [10] Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China, 2018, National Language and Character Work Committee. *China’s Standards of English Language Ability (National Language and Character Norms GF0018-2018)*, Higher Education Press, Beijing.
- [11] Hasselgreen A, 2013, Adapting the CEFR for the Classroom Assessment of Young Learners’ Writing. *The Canadian Modern Language Review*, 2013(04): 415–435.

Publisher’s note

Bio-Byword Scientific Publishing remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.