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Phenomenological Research into Chinese EFL Teachers' Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Exploring the professional difficulties EFL teachers face and discussing their classroom implications will undoubtedly increase the effectiveness and efficiency of EFL education. The primary objective of the study is to shed light on the difficulties faced by Chinese EFL teachers and how these issues may affect both ELT practice and academic inquiry in different education contexts. The participants were seven EFL teachers from different primary, secondary, and high schools in China. A phenomenological approach was adopted to explore the difficulties through multiple, in-depth interviews. Using the Constant Comparison Method, the researchers independently conducted content analysis of the qualitative data. The findings revealed 16 different themes, such as lack of pedagogical content knowledge, to difficulty in managing students' motivation and engagement, and centralized examination-driven educational system. The findings from the first-hand data were discussed in relation to implications in a way that will contribute to the field of EFL teacher training, policymakers, education leaders, and consequently, EFL teachers and learners.

Keywords: EFL; Teacher training; Challenges; Phenomenology; The Asian context

1. Introduction

In recent years, the significance of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching has experienced a remarkable surge

in China. The country's rapid globalization and increased emphasis on international communication have led to a growing demand for English language proficiency. Consequently, the

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role of EFL teachers in shaping linguistic competence and cultural understanding has become pivotal in China's educational landscape. However, this significance has also brought some challenges for EFL teachers, hindering the effectiveness of English language education. This research article aims to shed light on the challenges encountered by EFL teachers in China and their implications for English language education. By examining relevant literature and conducting a comprehensive analysis, this study seeks to identify key challenges faced by the teacher participants and proposes potential strategies to address them effectively.

The significance of this research study lies in its contribution to the field of English language education in a Chinese context. By gaining a deeper understanding of the obstacles encountered by EFL teachers, stakeholders in the education system can work towards creating a more supportive and empowering environment for educators. This knowledge might provide valuable insights for teacher training programs, educational policymakers, and other stakeholders involved in enhancing the quality of EFL instruction. As such, it is crucial to be aware of these challenges to provide the necessary support and resources to improve the quality of EFL education in China. Although there is some research on the same or similar subject, that previous research mostly employed quantitative data collection tools such as questionnaires and scales. As a contribution to the relevant literature, this study aims to reveal the real-life experiences of the participants by collecting first-hand, in-depth qualitative data with a phenomenological approach.

It is important to carry out a study that examines the difficulties faced by Chinese EFL teachers using a phenomenological approach because it enables a thorough examination of the teachers' actual lived experiences. This qualitative research method aims to understand a phenomenon from viewpoints of those who have experienced it themselves. The study can reveal more about the difficulties Chinese EFL teachers experience by taking this method, including language and cultural barriers, institutional and societal expectations, and factors peculiar to the Chinese EFL teaching and learning context. The knowledge gained from these insights can subsequently be used to guide ELT practice and research, as well as to advance knowledge of the difficulties experienced by Chinese EFL teachers and offer solutions for overcoming such difficulties. To serve best for the purpose of this study, the

answers to the following question are sought:

What challenges do EFL teachers face in the Chinese education context?

2. Literature review

EFL teachers meet various challenges in the global context. Relevant literature reveals two significant difficulties regarding teaching English, which are lack of learner motivation (Fareh, 2010; Pathan et al., 2016) and teachers' overburdened workload, leading to insufficient time for lesson preparation (Lengkanawati, 2005; Fareh, 2010; Tsagari & Vogt, 2017). Teachers in Europe and Asia report that their English skills are insufficient to support their current practice (Lengkanawati, 2005; Tsagari & Vogt, 2017), which result in a loss of self-esteem and confidence in their performance and ability to optimally manage their classroom (Arifin, 2017). Meanwhile, there is a disconnect between both the initial training and professional development that teachers receive and the demands of the education system in Asian countries. In Safari and Nashida's (2015) study, participants believe that policymakers, educators, and teachers need to adopt alternative ideologies, theories, and practices in order to improve pre-service and in-service teacher education for English language teachers in Iran. In Asian classrooms, large classes are a common problem for teachers of all educational levels, with class sizes ranging from 40 to 100 students (Lengkanawati, 2005; Ji, 2017). Students in such big classes often engage in irrelevant discussions and quarrels in class, which makes it difficult for teachers to maintain classroom discipline (Pathan et al., 2016; Ji, 2017). There is a shortage of basic educational infrastructure, teaching aids, and materials in schools, and most schools do not have an ideal teaching and learning environment (Pathan et al., 2016). In Asia, advanced Western English teaching methods such as Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) conflict with the traditional Confucian teacher-centered, test-centered, and grammar-centered educational culture (Ji, 2017). These interrelated factors can explain English language learners' silence, with roots in linguistic, psychological, and sociocultural factors, including communicative style (Harumi, 2011).

Chinese EFL teachers working in the field of English language teaching (ELT) in public schools at different education levels often encounter a variety of unique challenges that

can have a direct impact on their ability to teach effectively. These difficulties are frequently caused by cultural and linguistic obstacles as well as expectations from institutions and people. To properly support and develop Chinese EFL teachers and to raise the standard of English language instruction in China, it is crucial to be aware of these difficulties of ELT professionals and researchers. As Wu (2001) highlights, “it is teachers who hold the key to the outcome of reform and therefore of ELT” (2001, p. 192).

There are studies focusing on the challenges and resilience of EFL teachers, although not many, in the context of Chinese education in the relevant literature (Cheng & Wang, 2004; Yang, 2022). However, these studies, which are mostly designed with quantitative research approaches, cannot go beyond drawing the general picture of the phenomenon with the descriptive statistics derived from the scales. In the context of China’s exam-oriented education, English as a foreign language (EFL) has always occupied a crucial position in the college entrance examination. Since the college entrance examination is considered a turning point in the learning trajectories of Chinese high school students, it makes teaching a demanding and stressful profession in China (Gu & Li, 2013; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2020), where EFL teachers are faced with severe physical and emotional stress (Chu et al., 2021; Fan et al., 2021; Zhang, 2021). In addition, EFL teachers are also affected by increasing teaching pressure, negative emotions caused by interpersonal dysfunction (Gkonou et al., 2020), and excessive and unrealistic public expectations (Wen & Zhang, 2020). Finally, although the dropout rates of Chinese teachers are low (Gu & Li, 2013), they do suffer from attrition and public dissatisfaction, and they may be left uninformed about wider educational and political contexts (Wen & Zhang, 2020). In a recent study, negative and significant correlations between teacher burnout, teacher aggression, and teacher professional success were found (Yang, 2022), which implies that higher levels of aggression and burnout are associated with less professional success among Chinese EFL teachers. As for solutions to such problems, Liu and Chu (2022) suggest promoting holistic language development, providing adequate support and resources, fostering positive interpersonal relationships, and managing public expectations.

The New Curriculum Standards for teaching English have been introduced in China. However, many participants

in Lei and Medwell’s (2022) study expressed ambiguity regarding the revisions’ effects, the meaning of the move to student-centered teaching and learning, and the additional requirements for professional development. Likewise, some studies (e.g., Hu, 2005; Qiang & Kang, 2011; Rao, 2013; Wu, 2001) highlighted the need for training the local EFL teachers for proper implementation of the new curriculum standards for teaching English.

Adopting a phenomenological approach, this research aimed to collect detailed and reliable data by eliminating the mentioned weaknesses. Uncovering the problems that are unique to EFL teachers might give ideas to decision-makers, education leaders, and school administrations to make necessary improvements in the context of Chinese foreign language education.

3. Method

The study employed the phenomenological research method, which is closely tied to philosophy and aims to describe how people experience, interpret, understand, and conceptualize a phenomenon. Phenomenology focuses on understanding the essence or primary underlying meaning of experiences, making it suitable for qualitative methodologies that delve into participants’ experiences (Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 1990). According to Creswell (1998), phenomenology explores how individuals interpret their own experiences in relation to a phenomenon, seeking to uncover the fundamental aspects of those experiences. Patton (1990) describes phenomenological investigation as an account of people’s experiences and perceptions, as well as the core ideas within those experiences.

This approach makes it possible to collect in-depth, first-hand information about the difficulties faced by EFL teachers. The investigation employed a hermeneutic phenomenology approach. Hermeneutic phenomenology, according to Van Manen (1997), focuses on the phenomenon that is experienced and how it is understood. With this method, the goal is to intuitively give a phenomenon rich meaning. In this procedure, the researchers took active roles.

3.1 Location of the study

To best serve the purpose of the study, different education institutions in China were selected. They include

Longquan Zheda High School, Wenzhou No. 21 Middle School, Yuyao Shuaikang Primary School, Wenzhou Foreign Language School, and Mingxi Middle School.

3.2 Participants

The sampling procedure of the study included two different sampling techniques. First, through convenient sampling, the researchers reached the potential participants whose WeChat contacts they had. Then, through the snowball sampling technique, the researchers asked participants to share the invitation with their friends. The study was conducted with the voluntary participation of seven adult EFL teachers; two of them were from primary schools, three of them were from middle schools, and two of them were from high schools. The participants were selected according to purposeful sampling. That is, they were supposed to be at least 3-year-experienced public school Chinese teachers. The participants were invited to the study with informed consent and received no financial compensation. **Table 1** below shows demographic information about the participants.

3.3 Data collection

Multiple interviews that included one open-ended question were conducted on an online video-conferencing application, i.e., Tencent Meeting (please see Appendix A for the interview protocol). The interviews were conducted in the participants' mother tongue so that they could express their feelings more comfortably. In line with phenomenological inquiry, the number of participants was not high, so the researchers could conduct at least two interviews, each lasting about 25–30 minutes, with each participant. The participants were asked the following question on the challenges they face as EFL teachers during the dialogue-based, unstructured, interactive interviews.

“As an EFL teacher in the Chinese education context, do you experience any challenges? If yes, please describe them in detail.”

Moustakas (1994) points out the significance of determining, defining, and discussing the keywords in the research question before starting phenomenological research. “EFL”, “teacher”, “context”, “experience”, “challenges”, and “describe” are the words determined as the keywords for this research. “Teacher” in this study refers to the participants who

are employed as EFL instructors in official contexts, meaning educational institutions. “EFL” in this study refers to English language instruction as a foreign language in the Chinese context. The terms “context” and “experience” relate to the context of formal education in China and the participants' own experiences with EFL instruction in schools, respectively. The keyword, “challenges,” relates to the difficulties that people face while they pursue their careers. The last keyword, “describe”, refers to participants' interpretations of the phenomenon and their own descriptions of it.

3.4 Data analysis

In this phenomenological research, the data was analyzed using the Constant Comparison Method (Glaser, 1992), which is a widely used approach in qualitative research for analyzing data. The researchers separately examined the data to guarantee inter-rater reliability. The researchers first transcribed all the interviews and then read through them several times to identify initial codes. All four researchers coded each transcript independently. These initial codes were then compared with the subsequent interviews to identify similarities and differences, and the coding process was repeated until no new codes emerged. The researchers also used a negotiated approach to data analysis, where they discussed their findings and interpretations with each other to reach a consensus on the meaning of the data. This approach helped to ensure that the findings were reliable and valid.

Both deductive and inductive approaches were used in the data analysis process. The deductive approach was used to identify codes that were based on the research question and the existing literature. The inductive approach was used to identify codes that emerged from the data itself. These codes were then grouped into themes and patterns to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under investigation. The data analysis process was iterative and ongoing, with the researchers constantly revising and refining their interpretations as new data emerged. This helped to ensure that the findings were grounded in the data and reflected the perspectives of the participants.

3.5 Validity and reliability

Validity in qualitative research, particularly in phenomenological studies, necessitates a rigorous approach to

Table 1. Demographic information of the participants.

<i>Participants' nick names</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Teaching level</i>	<i>Teaching experience</i>
Charlie	female	high school	15 years
Joey	female	middle school	23 years
Lisa	female	middle school	4 years
Leo	male	primary school	3 years
Wendy	female	high school	5 years
Yvonne	female	primary school	3 years
Yolanda	female	middle school	12 years

ensure reliable and valuable findings (Glesne, 2006; Merriam, 1995). Phenomenological validation demands fidelity to its foundational assumptions and theoretical frameworks, emphasizing the researcher’s engagement in the epoche process to suspend preconceptions and uncover the essence of experiences (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). A subjectivity statement aids in identifying and mitigating biases, particularly during data analysis (Ashworth, 1999). In this study, among four researchers three of them had English language teaching experience. Therefore, before the interviews, the research team conducted multiple meetings to ensure that every member would place their perceptions and previous knowledge about the phenomenon in brackets; that is, everyone would suspend their perceptions and prejudgments regarding the EFL teachers’ challenges phenomenon. Member checks and peer review further mitigate researcher subjectivity, ensuring robust findings (Merriam, 1995). Peer review ensures impartial treatment of participant statements, preventing researchers’ subjectivity from influencing the study’s perception and findings. Similarly, in this study, four researchers independently analyzed transcripts, and they decided on the codes and finalized the themes through rigorous discussions and negotiations, enhancing the study’s rigor and credibility.

Furthermore, transparency in reporting and general steps to increase validity are crucial in phenomenological inquiry (Ragin et al., 2004). Transparency allows readers to understand the study’s context, evaluate the findings, and judge their transferability. In this study, detailed descriptions of the study context and analysis processes, as well as presentations of the data samples were provided. Digital copies of the raw data and all versions of coded transcripts are available on request.

4. Findings

Based on the analysis of the quantitative data gathered from seven participants, codes that repeated 646 times emerged. Out of those codes, 16 themes were created (See Appendix B for the complete list of themes). The eight most frequent themes were lack of pedagogical content knowledge, difficulty in managing students’ motivation and engagement, centralized examination-driven education system, lack of school support, students’ background, teacher burnout, external evaluation of teachers, and few class hours. **Figure 1** below shows the most frequent themes that emerged.

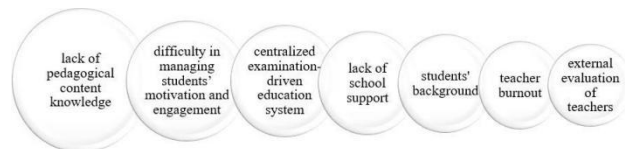


Figure 1. Most frequent themes about the challenges.

Table 2 shows important statements, codes, and themes emerged from the analysis of Chinese EFL teachers’ responses. On the left column, the extracts from the original statements of the participants are categorized according to their relation to the phenomenon. In the middle are codes that emerged from the important statements. On the right column are the themes that emerged based on the codes after numerous discussions and negotiations among the researchers.

Most of the participants repeatedly stated that they were experiencing difficulty teaching English both in terms of pedagogy and content knowledge. They admit that they need to get prepared a lot before the English classes. They complain about not knowing the teaching methodology for specific language skills and areas. Some of the original statements of the participants about the ‘lack of pedagogical content knowledge’ theme are as follow:

Joey. “*I am now saying that English teaching is indeed a*

Table 2. EFL Teachers' Challenges.

Important statements	Codes	Themes
<p>I am not an education major. As far as English is concerned, I just do exercises, and I do a lot of exercises. So I feel that I don't know how to face this. I can only have good expectations for them. Do what I should do, and then everything depends on themselves. I am just reading, following the record, and nothing else. I don't know if this way is right now, but so far this is the best way I can find. But I found that none of my methods worked for them. It is still difficult for teachers who work in the front line. How can it be practicable? How do we make benefits for students? It's all quite challenging. Because the situation is completely different from what I learned in theory</p>	Lack of pedagogical background	
<p>I can't use all English in class. English is more difficult to have such big projects. If we start to do a project, there is a high demand for teachers' capacity. My background knowledge is not enough. My own pronunciation is not very good. You may not know which is more important for some key knowledge. I am now saying that English teaching is indeed difficult and challenging for me. I feel like I need to improve on the reading comprehension. There are many new words in the article, and my vocabulary is not enough. You can only do more questions yourself, learn to summarize, and learn to find answers in the text. Lead the students to do it together I also need to look up some words and use Baidu to find them out. I feel that my English vocabulary is not enough. My problem now is that I have to read through the new English curriculum standards.... the interpretation of the new curriculum is a difficult problem. How to actually do it? You must constantly update yourself</p>	Lack of content knowledge	Lack of pedagogical content knowledge
<p>And you will meet students with different personalities or students with poor discipline. You will have problems with class control and the like, get along with the students.</p>	Poor discipline	
<p>It probably reflects that [students] interest in learning English has decreased. Therefore, I feel that students' interests will slowly fade away during classes. It takes time. If a child wants to exploit, he is too lazy to pronounce or speak. In high school, fewer and fewer hands were raised. They were reluctant to raise their hands[answering questions].</p>	No interest	Difficulty in managing students' motivation and engagement
<p>They don't listen carefully in class, and, they don't realize the importance of learning. They don't know that they don't know that learning is for themselves. It's for getting into a good high school, choosing a good major, and for their own future. They don't have this awareness.</p>	Low motivation	
<p>The difficulty of the Zhongkao [centralized exam] is beyond the textbook. Exam is the main criterion for final tests. If we just learn from textbooks, the vocabulary and the difficulty of reading for students is completely unbearable. Thus, if you want to get a high score in the high school entrance examination, students need quite a lot of extra reading</p>	Centralized exams' difficulty	Centralized examination-driven education system
<p>Most places are still test-oriented, and tests are still worthier than application. More opportunities to speak, to express, and to show are needed. I think this form of output is not so, so diverse. That is, um, because it is still exam.</p>	Test-oriented approach	
<p>It includes the amount of extensive reading but also includes the amount of intensive reading. The difficulty is not that low.</p>	Too high expectations	
<p>We might also wish for more systematic guidance on aspects of teaching writing. As for writing class, it may come out that everyone plays their own... It is based on teachers' own ideas, and there is no systematic guidance for teachers</p>	Guidance needed	
<p>Teacher cannot win if one fights alone. Some schools do better in this aspect is that they do a better job in teamwork. Thus, they can better help teachers. It is all related to the leadership of the school. If the leader helps you organize a (team) and lets you work together, then the personal growth of students and teachers will be smoother. So actually teachers need help from school.</p>	Schools should support teachers	Lack of school support

Table 2. Cont.

Important statements	Codes	Themes
Some old teachers will not give you their teaching resources directly. You need to listen to their classes, and then they may give you this resource. So a lot of time needs to go by yourself. you have to prepare it yourself.	Lack of support from the colleagues	Lack of school support
If you have any questions, you can ask the teaching and research group leader. But our teaching and research group leader is also quite young. He didn't have much class to. He haven't attended many rounds of classes.	Lack of support from teaching leaders	
Because we are also a rural school! If it was all in English, students might not understand it. The migrant workers' children. The source of students is getting worse and worse. Their language foundation is not good, because most of the children I teach in our school are children of migrant workers.	Rural schools' students' profile	Students' background
The foundation of the students is not good. This is also a challenge.	Lack of good foundation	
His ability level did not match the difficulty of the current class. If you teach quickly and you criticize him for procrastinating and slowness. Then it will get worse. But in fact, the gap between these scores is very large as they are educated in different elementary schools.	Students' backgrounds vary	
Teachers generally can't rest at noon, neither can English teachers. The effort being paid is also a lot more.	No time to rest	Teacher burnout
You will spend more time in the extraLike correcting their recitation and correcting their pronunciation.	Too much effort	
For teachers, that's how you squeeze in time while you're in school and squeeze in off-campus, finding something extra. This is also quite challenging. It is necessary for us to spend quite a lot of time on additional things, such as additional teaching materials. So this is a burden.	Too many tasks in limited time	
I am very afraid that other teachers will say that I am not teaching well. What I fear most is the discussion among my colleagues and the pressure from the principal. Teachers will come to listen to your class. If it is an open class there will be so much pressure. They will correct, have comments and corrections. Sometimes, uh, I feel a little frustrated when I was corrected too much.	Comments from workplace	External evaluation of teachers
When they talked about it, they would just say that the high scores were not many. There are a lot of people who fail. When I hear these very small comments, I feel unhappy. In order to avoid this kind of unhappiness, I sometimes put a lot of pressure on myself.	Evaluation of students' grade	
Our course schedule time is also limited. The time prepared to practice their spoken English is compressed. It's all gone. I just worry that after doing these activities, there is not enough time for what I should have. Doing that activity is actually very time-consuming.	Limited class time	Few class hours
Our lesson in high school is also very tight. We don't have much time to go to students to watch some fun. For example, we can arrange tasks, but we may have no time to discuss them. You have relatively high requirements for his pronunciation, which is also very energy-consuming and time-consuming.	No time for production and fun	

little difficult and challenging for me. As for the strategy, you can only do more questions yourself, learn to summarize, and learn to find answers in the text. Lead the students to do it together and do one article in every class”.

Lisa. “You still need to study textbooks. Sometimes you don’t know which one is the key point, some have some content, maybe it’s just a little bit this time”.

Leo. “I may not give them a lot of guidance. For example, how to learn this word, how to memorize the text, or how to use it after learning the key sentence patterns... How to preview? I don’t explain this to them clearly, and then include it in the class process...And then I probably can’t give them guidance either”.

Wendy. “I was constantly trying to improve my professional knowledge..., Well, I feel that, yes, with the new college entrance examination, I also face relatively big challenges in terms of professional knowledge. You need to constantly update yourself, including doing and answering questions, understanding the current reading topics, context, etc.”.

Yvone. “Because the situation is completely different from what I learned in theory, so I am very confused about how to teach”.

Yolanda. “We haven’t got much training on how to teach writing. Therefore, most teachers seemingly have no special training for students’ writing”.

The other most frequent complaint of the teachers regarding the challenges they face was about having a hard time motivating and engaging their students. The participants often stated that the students hardly ever have interests toward learning English, apparently because they do not relate it to real life. The participants highlighted the difficulties regarding classroom management due to students’ lack of interest and also being indifferent to learning English. Some of their statements are as follow:

Charlie. “In high school, fewer and fewer hands were raised. They were reluctant to raise their hands [answering questions].”

Lisa. “They don’t listen carefully in class, and, thirdly, they don’t realize the importance of learning.”

Leo. “... as I just said, I know that this class should have a principle of having fun, but I didn’t do it, and my students

showed no interest.”

Wendy. “One is that in terms of motivation, it will be more stressful.”

Yvonne. “Then I just hope that the enthusiasm of the child can be higher, and then spend more time [on this subject] after class.”

In addition to the challenges related to managing students’ motivation and engagement, the participants frequently mentioned the centralized exams and how they affect their teaching negatively. They admitted that they felt like being under pressure to catch up with the requirements of the centralized exams. Their statements revealed that the teachers spend more time preparing their students for those exams rather than focusing on communicative activities in their classes. Some of the original statements of the participants about the ‘centralized examination-driven educational system’ theme are as follows:

Joey. “After the reform in 2015, the English test papers and English teaching have all become difficult...Regardless of whether it works or not, it is all about scores, and they all say that they must go to college...we said that there is actually an exam-oriented education”.

Charlie. “However, usually, when we are teaching, students attach great importance to the score. Teachers attach great importance to it, and the school also attaches great importance to it...exam-oriented techniques...hitting the books and cramming exam questions”.

Leo. “Every time I am in the class, I think about these two pressures; exam preparation or the activity, and I say, let’s put that activity aside for now”.

Wendy. “Including the new national college entrance examination now, it has become relatively difficult ...as for the listening, we practice a piece of listening every day. Because the proportion of the college entrance examination is still relatively large -30 points. We are basically preparing for the college entrance examination for English”.

Another frequently repeated challenge seemed to emerge from a strong need for professional support from the schools. The participants highlighted the need for orientation and pedagogical content support and guidance from the schools, especially for novice teachers. They often men-

tioned that they felt alone while coping with the challenges regarding their English teaching practices. Some of the original statements of the participants about the ‘lack of school support’ themes are as follow:

Yolanda. *“We might also wish for more systematic guidance on aspects of teaching writing from schools... one cannot win if one fights alone. Some schools do better because they do a better job in teamwork. Thus, they can better help teachers...It is related to the leadership of the school. If the leader helps you organize a (team) and lets you work together, then the personal growth of students and teachers will be higher”.*

Yvone. *“There is no systematic and professional guidance and help... We have no lesson preparation group, no teaching and research group, we can just explore by ourselves, so in this process”.*

Leo. *“In terms of teaching, because of the particularity of the working environment of this school, we do not have the awareness of a team in the English teaching and research group... That I would feel as a new teacher not getting a great training... None of the teachers feel very good. No system supports me, right!”.*

5. Discussion and implications

Considering the findings, the biggest issue that teachers in China are facing seems to be a lack of adequate professional training. Inadequate training for EFL instructors who are actively teaching can also be ascribed to the lack of a language assessment knowledge requirement in the teacher qualification test and the lack of training for in-service teachers in China. Several studies (e.g., Hu, 2005; Qiang & Kang, 2011; Rao, 2013; Wu, 2001) stressed the significance of teacher preparation and the necessity of training local EFL teachers sufficiently in terms of implementing the English language curriculum.

The participants in this study frequently complained about their lack of pedagogical content knowledge, and this does not seem to be a new phenomenon in the Chinese EFL teaching context. There are studies highlighting the same problem that teachers experience. Wu (2001) made evident the difficulties faced by EFL teachers in China at all educational levels as a result of the country’s rising demand for English language instruction. Hu’s (2005) analysis of English

language education policy included a thorough discussion of the difficulties brought on by the coexistence of expanding English language education, an increase in the number of students, and a teacher shortage. The author noted that curricula did not effectively prepare EFL teachers, and pre-service teacher education programs lacked qualified professors. Similarly, the introduction of an English immersion program, according to Qiang and Kang (2011), necessitated careful hiring and professional development in English language proficiency and immersion pedagogies. Rao (2013) describes the difficulties local EFL instructors confront in “reconciling modern technologies with the traditional ways of teaching in China” (p. 38).

Likewise, Song and Cheng’s (2011) investigation of EFL teachers’ backgrounds, instructional contexts, professional development, and perceptions revealed that teacher training programs need to be improved with the help of instructional materials and continued professional development. Sharing the same ideas with the participants of this study, the teachers stated their limited English ability as the biggest obstacle. Especially in terms of teaching EFL writing, the participants of this study express a lack of confidence in their ability to effectively teach writing skills. Lee (2010) outlined the necessity of writing teacher courses in teacher education programs at the undergraduate and graduate levels in her study on EFL writing teacher education, and the findings indicate that the professional growth of EFL instructors was assisted by writing teacher education. The challenge of lack of professional training can be seen in the global settings as well. In Tsagari and Vogt’s (2017) international mixed-methods study, participants admit that they are not competent enough in language assessment and foreign language teaching. This requires taking a close look at educators’ professional development and language assessment practices, which can help EFL educators create a dynamic and contextually aware assessment literacy culture.

It is believed that language planning could be achieved through a collaborative team effort, adopting an impartial and neutral technological standpoint. Despite the theoretical flaw suggesting that policy decisions should be rooted in understanding learner needs and community language requirements, in real-life contexts, such considerations are often disregarded. Instead, policy decisions tend to reflect the broader societal and governmental perspectives on the lan-

languages involved rather than focusing on educational or community needs. That is, there is often a significant gap between language policy decision-makers and the practical needs of teachers implementing these policies (Kaplan, 2004). Likewise, in this study, participants frequently voice concerns about their lack of understanding regarding new curriculum policies and perceive top-down decisions by policymakers as neglectful of the guidance teachers require. This study underscores the disconnect between policy decisions, which are often made without consideration for learner needs or community language requirements, and the actual challenges faced by teachers in implementing these policies in their classrooms. This mismatch between policymaking and classroom implementation contributes to teachers' feelings of incompetence and frustration.

In this context, Lei and Medwell's (2022) mixed methods study focused on the new curriculum standards for teaching English that have been introduced in China, and how teachers perceive the new curriculum, and the challenging new role that it suggests for instructors. The authors highlight that teachers involved in the change must share a common understanding of the reform's nature, aims, and scope for it to be properly implemented. The findings revealed similar comments to those expressed in this study. The participants of this study frequently expressed ambiguity regarding the revisions' effects, the meaning of the move to student-centered teaching and learning, and the additional requirements for professional development. It can be concluded that introducing new ideas and practices should consider teachers' existing curriculum knowledge and experiences as well as how they perceive the reasons behind the changes and that doing so should foster a common understanding of those goals.

The implications of the findings highlighting the lack of pedagogical content knowledge among EFL teachers in China are significant for enhancing the quality of English language education. To address this issue effectively, various strategies can be implemented. Firstly, providing teachers with targeted in-service training programs tailored to strengthen their pedagogical skills and content knowledge is essential. Additionally, research leaders could play a pivotal role by furnishing teachers with comprehensive teaching materials and lesson plans aligned with the curriculum objectives. Establishing guidance and consultation centers within school districts would offer continuous support to teachers, enabling them to seek assistance

and advice when encountering difficulties. Implementing peer observations and fostering collaborative negotiations on best practices can facilitate knowledge sharing and professional growth among educators. Furthermore, conducting regular faculty meetings focused on identifying and deliberating possible solutions for the challenges faced by teachers would foster a supportive and constructive environment.

Finally, creating online communities for teachers to exchange best practices and practical solutions can serve as a valuable platform for professional development and peer support. Also, arranging regular teacher exchange programs for all teachers may influence several positive outcomes. Firstly, it enables exceptional teachers to share their teaching resources and experiences with colleagues, potentially enhancing teaching quality. Secondly, it fosters the exchange of novel teaching ideas and methods among teachers, promoting teaching innovation. Thirdly, it promotes school cohesion by encouraging teamwork and acknowledging excellence within the teaching community. Lastly, it contributes to education by offering fresh insights and directions for educational practice and policy. Findings of some studies indicate that organizing regular academic exchange activities for exceptional teachers is a practical and effective approach to promoting teaching quality, innovation, teamwork, and educational development (Bashan & Holsblat, 2017; Sita *Nirmala Kumaraswamy* & Chitale, 2012). These implications can offer valuable insights for educational managers and policymakers seeking to improve teaching and learning in schools. By implementing these multifaceted approaches, educational institutions can empower EFL teachers in China to overcome the hurdles posed by the lack of pedagogical content knowledge, ultimately enhancing the quality of English language instruction.

As another common challenge, difficulty in managing students' motivation and engagement may be viewed as a global issue rather than being peculiar to China. Fareh's (2010) study in the Arab world revealed lack of motivation on the part of the learners as one of the biggest challenges EFL teachers face. The author concludes that these difficulties might be lessened by holding a student-centered approach by maximizing the amount of time that students spend speaking in class, implementing interactive, communicative teaching activities, and requiring teachers to hold a teaching certificate in addition to their degree in English language and literature. However, a student-centered approach to teaching might not

be that easy as it suggested, especially in the Chinese EFL context. The emphasis on student participation in communicative activities, students' holistic quality improvement, and meaningful communication in real-world contexts are in opposition to the teacher-centered, exam-focused, grammar-focused, and teacher-centered Confucian legacy cultures of education in Asia (Ji, 2017). Moreover, a student-centered approach might be far-fetched in a Chinese context where class sizes are often huge. The most effective setup for teaching English is to a small group of pupils (Broughton et al., 2003). It works best with a class of 20–25 students. With only one school per district in China, for example, this number may be challenging (Hasanah & Utami, 2020). One grade in China frequently consisted of seven classes, each with 50 students. Since there were so many of them, it is challenging for teachers to monitor each student's progress (Hasanah & Utami, 2018).

Despite these challenges, there are potential micro and macro-level implications for addressing these issues. At the micro-level, educators could explore innovative instructional techniques and leverage supplemental materials to enhance engagement and participation within large classroom settings. By using a variety of instructional techniques and approaches, as well as supplemental materials, to teach English in large classroom settings, this problem is likely to be resolved (Hasanah & Utami, 2020). Additionally, targeted professional development programs could equip teachers with the necessary skills and strategies to implement student-centered approaches effectively. At the macro-level, education policymakers may need to reconsider class size policies and invest in infrastructure to facilitate smaller class sizes, thereby fostering more conducive learning environments for English language acquisition. Furthermore, efforts to reform curricula and assessment frameworks to prioritize meaningful communication and holistic skill development over rote memorization and examination performance could align with broader educational objectives. Overall, addressing the complex challenges of student motivation and engagement in EFL classrooms requires a multifaceted approach that integrates both micro and macro-level interventions tailored to the specific needs and contexts of individual educational systems.

The prevalence of an exam-oriented approach to teaching English in China presents significant challenges for ed-

ucators and learners alike. English proficiency exams, such as the national college entrance examination, play a significant role in students' academic trajectories. EFL teachers are often under immense pressure to prepare students for these exams, focusing on test-taking skills rather than holistic language development. The emphasis on exam results creates a high-stakes environment that can be overwhelming for both teachers and students (Li et al., 2018; Li & Liu, 2021; Liu & Li, 2020). Consequently, EFL teachers find themselves devoting considerable time and effort to exam preparation, often resorting to drill-based practices rather than engaging in student-centered pedagogies. The participants in this study often expressed how stressful and time-consuming it was for them to meet the requirements for standardized tests. Instead of devoting time to student-focused and engaging activities, research participants reported that they frequently attempted to help their students prepare for tests by having them solve test questions. Leading to problems with stress and time management, the centrally administered examination-driven educational system was indicated to be a significant element in the challenges these teachers face, and this seems to be parallel with the findings of Cheng and Wang's (2004) study.

To address these challenges, interventions are needed both by schools and policy makers. Educators can explore alternative assessment methods that prioritize language proficiency and communication skills over rote memorization and test performance. Incorporating project-based learning, portfolio assessments, and authentic tasks can foster deeper engagement and meaningful language use among students. Additionally, professional development programs can equip teachers with strategies for integrating exam preparation into broader communicative language teaching approaches, thereby promoting a more balanced instructional approach. At the macro-level, systemic reforms are necessary to alleviate the undue pressure placed on teachers and students by the exam-oriented education system. This may involve revising curriculum frameworks to emphasize language acquisition and proficiency rather than exam outcomes, as well as diversifying assessment practices to encompass a broader range of language competencies. Furthermore, policymakers should consider the broader societal implications of high-stakes testing and explore alternative pathways for evaluating student achievement and promoting educational equity. By addressing these issues at both the micro and macro levels, stake-

holders can work towards creating a more student-centered, holistic approach to EFL instruction that fosters genuine language learning and development.

According to the findings, participants lack substantial support from schools, which may lead to heightened feelings of isolation and hinder their ability to effectively cope with the challenges in English language instruction. The responses related to their reflections on the earlier years of their professions reveal that this challenge of not getting enough support from schools seems to be a lot tougher. Without adequate orientation, pedagogical content support, and ongoing guidance from experienced teachers, novice EFL teachers may struggle to develop their teaching skills and confidence in the classroom. In no time, a novice teacher shoulders comparable responsibilities to those with extensive experience in the field (Fantilli & McDougall, 2009). They undertake the tasks typically handled by seasoned educators, encompassing instructional delivery and classroom management (Worthy, 2005). Novice teachers in challenging environments often grapple with feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt. Without adequate support systems, only the most resilient and determined individuals thrive (Colbert & Wolfe, 1992). When newly minted teachers are left to fend for themselves without the necessary assistance, the repercussions for schools and districts can be monumental (David, 2000).

This lack of support impacts the professional growth of individual teachers and potentially compromises the quality of English language education provided to students. Therefore, schools must recognize and address the need for comprehensive support systems tailored specifically to the unique needs of new EFL teachers (e.g., practice internship for pre-service teachers, the guidance of an experienced teacher, school support, and content knowledge and language proficiency training) to ensure their successful integration into the teaching profession and promote positive learning outcomes for students.

Students' background seems to be the fifth most frequently mentioned challenge. Mixed proficiency levels in English classes appear to affect classroom teaching practices negatively. In a diverse EFL classroom, teachers often encounter students with varying levels of English proficiency. This can create challenges in delivering instruction that meets the needs of all learners. To address this issue, EFL teachers may conduct pre-assessments to identify students' individual strengths and areas for improvement.

One potential strategy for addressing this challenge involves customizing instruction through the provision of extra materials and tasks suited to individual students' skill levels. Additionally, promoting peer tutoring and cooperative learning can create a supportive atmosphere for learning (Cheng & Wang, 2004). Also, educational policymakers and institutions can support teachers by providing professional development opportunities focused on effective instructional strategies for diverse classrooms. Furthermore, curriculum designers can develop materials and resources that accommodate different proficiency levels, ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities for all students. By implementing these practical solutions EFL educators can better address the challenges associated with mixed proficiency levels and create inclusive learning environments conducive to student success.

External evaluation appears to be another challenge faced by the participants in this study. EFL teachers in China often face unrealistic public expectations regarding their teaching outcomes. The public perception of English language education places significant pressure on teachers to deliver exceptional results. Unrealistic expectations can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and increased stress levels among EFL teachers (Wen & Zhang, 2020).

The present study provides insights into the challenges that external evaluation poses for teachers. Continuous self-improvement is deemed pivotal for teachers in this regard. Firstly, attending local teaching seminars can expose teachers to new educational concepts and enhance their teaching skills. Secondly, they can augment their teaching abilities by learning from experienced colleagues, focusing on the English language and teaching expertise. Thirdly, reflecting on their teaching through conversations with students, analyzing grades, and observing classroom performance, followed by adjusting their teaching strategies accordingly, can help teachers overcome various teaching challenges and cope with the pressure and anxiety stemming from external evaluation. For schools, organizing regular parent lectures and interviews can promote communication among parents, students, and teachers. This can facilitate a deeper understanding of students' learning status among parents, enabling them to assist their children in adapting their learning methods. Moreover, these measures can adjust some parents' educational concepts, enabling them to assume their educational responsibilities and gain real-time insights into their child's situation. This

way, misconceptions about teachers' instructional achievements can be avoided, thus reducing the challenges of external evaluation for teachers. Additionally, school leadership can arrange more activities or award teachers for their achievements and teaching, or provide bonuses or subsidies based on teachers' progress and performance to enhance their agency and motivation. These measures can also assist teachers in overcoming the challenges posed by external evaluation.

6. Limitations and suggestions for further research

This study employed a phenomenological approach to collect in-depth data about the experiences of the EFL teachers. Therefore, the sample size was kept limited. The study's sample size of seven EFL teachers may not adequately represent the diversity of experiences and challenges faced by EFL teachers across China. A larger and more diverse sample could provide a broader understanding of the issues at hand. Also, this study did not include a comparison group of EFL teachers from other countries or regions with different educational systems. A comparison with teachers from other contexts could provide valuable insights into the specific challenges faced by Chinese EFL teachers.

Future studies could aim to include a larger and more diverse sample of EFL teachers from various regions in China, representing different educational levels and teaching contexts. Conducting a longitudinal study to track the experiences and challenges of EFL teachers over time could provide a more comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing their professional development and classroom practice. Comparing the experiences of EFL teachers in China with those in other countries or regions with different educational systems could offer insights into the unique challenges and opportunities faced by Chinese EFL teachers. Also, combining qualitative interviews with quantitative surveys or observations could provide a more holistic understanding of the challenges faced by EFL teachers and their implications for classroom practice and student learning outcomes.

Author Contributions

Conceptualization, Ayse Taskiran and Hong Pan; methodology, Ayse Taskiran; software, Ayse Taskiran, Hong

Pan, Shaojun Xie, Zili Lin; validation, Ayse Taskiran, Zili Lin; formal analysis, Ayse Taskiran, Hong Pan, Zili Lin and Shaojun Xie; investigation, Hong Pan, Shaojun Xie, Zili Lin; resources, Hong Pan, Shaojun Xie, Zili Lin; data curation, Hong Pan, Shaojun Xie, Zili Lin; writing—original draft preparation, Ayse Taskiran; writing—review and editing, Ayse Taskiran, Hong Pan, Shaojun Xie, Zili Lin; visualization, Ayse Taskiran; supervision, Ayse Taskiran. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The authors confirm that the data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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Appendix A

The Interview Protocol



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Interview Protocol

The interviews will be conducted with the participants on a voluntary basis. All participants will be informed about the interview invitation. Among those who accept the invitation, seven participants will be selected according to purposeful sampling. The interviews will be conducted online on Tencent Meeting application. Time for the interviews will be determined according to the participants' convenience. The interviews will last about 20–25 minutes, and they will be conducted in Chinese. The voice recordings will be saved with the consent of the participants for qualitative data analysis.

An open and interactive structure in the form of unstructured dialogue will be adopted in the interviews. Only two questions will be asked during the interviews not to interfere with the subjective judgment of the participants. The questions are as follows:

“As an EFL teacher in the Chinese education context, do you experience any challenges? If yes, please describe them in detail.”

In addition, based on the statements of the participants, additional questions that encourage the giving of details or examples might be asked to enable more comprehensive data collection.

Appendix B

Themes and frequencies of relevant codes

Themes	Frequency of codes	%	
1	lack of pedagogical content knowledge	172	27%
2	Difficulty in managing students' motivation and engagement	105	16%
3	centralized examination-driven education system	84	13%
4	lack of school support	54	8%
5	students' background	52	8%
6	teacher burnout	42	7%
7	external evaluation of teachers	29	4%
8	few class hours	24	4%
9	poor English learning environment	17	3%
10	students' psychological issues	15	2%
11	lack of parent's support	13	2%
12	lack of teaching resources	11	2%
13	students' English proficiency varies greatly	10	2%
14	lack of teaching experience	8	1%
15	network influences students	6	1%
16	low learner performance	4	1%
	Total	646	100

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