

Improving EFL Teaching in Chinese Universities: Perceptions of Teachers with Oversea Experience

Xiaoshu Xu

School of Foreign Studies, Wenzhou University, Wenzhou, China

Yujie Su

School of Foreign Studies, Wenzhou University, Wenzhou, China
Corresponding Author: E-mail: susanwtf@wzu.edu.cn

Lu Xu

School of Foreign Studies, Wenzhou University, Wenzhou, China

Yunfeng Zhang

Centre for Portuguese Studies, Macau Polytechnic University, Macao

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Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of English teachers regarding the adverse effects of teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in China, as well as their proposals for improving EFL instruction in the country. By exploring the views of experienced English teachers, this study provides valuable insights into how English as a Foreign Language pedagogy can be improved in China and other countries. The main research question is about the adverse effects of teaching English as a Foreign Language in Chinese higher education and the ways to improve its instruction. A thematic analysis of semi-structured interviews was conducted on a sample of 20 English teachers who possessed substantial experience teaching in Chinese higher education institutions. The participants' teaching experience ranged from 3-20 years ($SD = 5.3$). The analysis involved the establishment of concordant codes and sub-codes, with the aid of two researchers and an external expert, to ensure the reliability and validity of the results. The findings showed that the teachers attributed English as a Foreign Language learners' English deficiencies to the English teaching curriculum, self-directed learning, and the education system. Finally, the teachers suggested that self-directed learning skills and self-regulation were crucial for effectively applying language in authentic contexts. These findings have implications beyond China and are expected to enhance English pedagogy in other English as a Foreign Language countries. Thus, this research may contribute to improving the effectiveness of English teaching in China and other countries by providing a deeper understanding of the challenges and potential solutions associated with English as a Foreign Language instruction.

Keywords: English as Foreign Language, higher education, overseas experience, side effects, teacher perception, thematic analysis

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Introduction

English, as the first global Lingua Franca, plays a crucial role in the era of informatization and globalization. The significance of EFL proficiency among Chinese university students has been widely recognized by researchers and policymakers (Zhang & Xu, 2019). In response, the Chinese government has invested heavily in EFL education in recent years to enhance the country's overall English proficiency. However, despite this investment, many Chinese university students still struggle with English, particularly weak in speaking and listening, due to the lack of a natural language environment in the EFL classroom (Gu, 2019). College English teaching and learning, including English education and reform in China, has become a hot topic in recent years (Wang et al., 2018; Yuan, 2022). This has led some scholars to question the effectiveness of current EFL teaching methods in Chinese higher education and to call for a re-evaluation of EFL pedagogy in light of current challenges (Li, 2018).

The digital era, with its increased opportunities for informatization and easy access to information via the Internet and multimedia, does not necessarily lead to authentic communication or enhanced EFL teaching and learning. Instead, it brings challenges. Recent research has focused on various side effects of EFL teaching, such as issues related to language proficiency, cultural identity, and teacher burnout (Chen, 2019; Derbyshire, 2018; Shehadeh & Coombe, 2019). In particular, several challenges or drawbacks of EFL teaching in China have been identified. A significant challenge is the lack of qualified EFL teachers, particularly in rural areas. This can result in lower-quality instruction and limited opportunities for students to practice their language skills, thereby exacerbating the challenge of improving English proficiency among Chinese university students.

Moreover, test-oriented teaching and learning approaches dominate EFL instruction in China, presenting a major challenge to the development of effective EFL pedagogy. EFL instruction is often geared towards preparing students to pass high-stakes English language proficiency tests, such as the College English Test (CET). The College English Curriculum (2022) aims to enhance the language competence of university students to meet their career and academic requirements by emphasizing the development of strategic and proactive learners through the use of diverse learning strategies. However, this focus on testing can lead to a narrow and superficial approach to language learning, characterized by a preoccupation with memorization and rote learning, at the expense of meaningful communication and interaction. This issue highlights the need for a re-evaluation of the role and purpose of testing in EFL instruction and a shift towards more communicative and interactive pedagogical approaches that prioritize the development of real-world language proficiency.

The existing research on the side effects of EFL teaching has predominantly examined traditional teaching methodologies employed in EFL during the period spanning from the 1980s to the 2000s (Fu, 1986; Rao, 2013). However, studies exploring side effects in secondary education have been limited (Hu, 2005), as have those conducted in higher education. The research has primarily employed methods such as classroom observation, conversation analysis, discourse analysis, or project intervention (Aubrey, 2021). There has been a dearth of qualitative studies, particularly those examining how EFL teachers with overseas experience comprehend professional EFL teaching in practice (Zhang & Watkins, 2007). As such, this research adopted a semi-structured interview approach to investigate English teachers' perceptions of EFL teaching in Chinese higher education.

Over the past decade, social acquisition has gained attention in the field of EFL teaching. According to Schilhab (2015), the social acquisition is an essential factor in the development of language skills in EFL education, alongside biological factors. From the perspective of social acquisition, this study aimed to investigate the perceptions of EFL teachers with overseas experience regarding the side effects of EFL teaching in China. The study aimed to uncover underlying conceptualizations towards EFL teaching, EFL self-learning, the education system, and language competence. The findings of this study can provide insights into the challenges and potential solutions for EFL teaching in China and other countries. To examine the adverse effects of EFL instruction in Chinese higher education and enhance the quality of English language teaching in China, this study conducted interviews with English teachers possessing overseas teaching experience to explore their perceptions. Two research questions were thus raised:

Question One: What are the side effects of EFL teaching in Chinese higher education?

Question Two: How to improve the effectiveness of EFL teaching in Chinese higher education?

A qualitative research design was carried out in which the data were analyzed through thematic analysis, which consists of a research approach that presents effective objectivity in the analysis of issues (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

The paper commences with a thorough examination of the challenges associated with EFL teaching in China and globally. A comprehensive review of the literature on the effects and side effects of EFL teaching is presented before delving into the relevant theories applied to EFL teaching. The methodology employed in the study is then introduced and justified, taking into account ongoing debates surrounding the efficacy of EFL teaching in higher education, which in turn informed the semi-structured interview approach. This section also provides an introduction to the study participants and details the experimental process. Subsequently, an analysis of the empirical data obtained is presented. Finally, the paper explores the recommendations of the participating teachers on strategies to enhance EFL teaching in higher education.

Literature Review

Side Effects/Challenges of EFL Teaching in Higher Education

The challenges and drawbacks of EFL teaching are a matter of concern in many regions worldwide due to limited input quantity and quality (Krashen, 2009) as well as access to interaction (Gass & Mackey, 2006). Teacher proficiency varies, and some conventional grammar instruction is insufficient in imparting EFL learners with extensive and systematic knowledge (e.g., mastery of tense, common difficulties in generality, referentiality, specificity, and noun countability; formulation of verbal phrases in writing through a learner corpus) because it conceives grammar as a set of rules without integrating syntax with semantics or language use with cognitive development (Chan, 2022).

Meanwhile, EFL instruction has been found to potentially have a negative impact on students' first language development, as several studies have shown that increased exposure to a second language may lead to language attrition in the first language (Slavkov, 2016). Additionally, the cultural and ideological aspects of EFL teaching pose a challenge. The global spread of English has been criticized for promoting cultural homogenization (Trninić, 2016) and EFL instruction can lead to the internalization of dominant cultural values and worldviews, potentially impacting learners' sense of identity and relationships with others (Lou & Noels, 2018). Therefore, it is

essential to recognize the diverse values and benefits of language learning beyond just economic ones, to motivate collective action and promote sustainable development (Chan et al., 2016).

Several studies suggest that EFL teaching in China poses significant challenges and side effects, as students often struggle to use English effectively, despite the extensive investment of time and resources (Chen & Lu, 2021; Wang, 2018). For instance, Chen and Lu (2021) found that a majority of surveyed Chinese university students lacked confidence in their English proficiency and faced difficulties expressing themselves in English. Wang (2018) similarly observed that graduates often lacked the practical language skills necessary for the workplace. The Chinese education system's emphasis on rote memorization and test-taking skills may devalue authentic communication and critical thinking in EFL learning, according to some scholars (Li, 2020). Moreover, research has indicated that students' attitudes toward EFL learning can be negatively impacted by the high-stakes nature of English proficiency exams, leading to anxiety and a lack of motivation to learn (Liu & Hu, 2020).

Factors Impact the EFL Teaching and Learning Effectiveness in Higher Education

The challenges of EFL teaching in higher education are compounded by several factors that negatively affect its effectiveness. These include limited exposure to English outside of the classroom, a lack of interaction with native speakers, and a shortage of qualified EFL teachers (Yang & Gao, 2020). In addition, several internal factors have been identified that influence the effectiveness of EFL learning, such as self-regulated learning (Teng, 2022), learning motivation and interests (Lamb, Csizér, Henry & Ryan, 2019), and the development of Information Communications Technology (Cheung, Wang, & Kwok, 2023).

Self-regulated Learning

Self-regulated learning (SRL) is a fundamental aspect of EFL teaching and learning as it nurtures self-regulated learners who possess independent, goal-oriented lifelong learning strategies (Oxford, 2011; S. Zhang & L. Zhang, 2019). SRL refers to the "active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and attempt to monitor, regulate and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior" (Pintrich, 2000, p. 453). Using SRL skills effectively enhances academic performance (S. Zhang & L. Zhang, 2019). SRL involves a dynamic and cyclical process that requires the systematic use of strategies in goal-directed activities and feedback loops to enhance learning effectiveness (Teng, 2022).

Learning Motivation and Interest

Intrinsic motivation and interest in language learning are important factors that impact the success of EFL learners, as they play a vital role in monitoring the learning process and adjusting SRL strategies (Gardner, 1985, 2006, 2010). Classroom learning motivation is influenced by the social context and group dynamics, with highly motivated students demonstrating superior academic performance due to longer attention spans, less distraction, and greater progress and satisfaction (Zimmerman & Schunk, 2008; Yanguas, 2011). Students who approach coursework with intrinsic goals and perceive the material as interesting and significant are more likely to utilize cognitive and metacognitive strategies in their EFL learning, particularly in learning to write in English (Pintrich, Smith, Garcia & McKeachie, 1993; Teng, 2022). Moreover, interest in tasks is a crucial factor that influences EFL learning and can serve as a key driver for strategic and effective learning. Interest is considered a dynamic state that emerges from an ongoing interaction among

EFL goals, activity characteristics, and context, within the motivational regulation construct (Sansone & Thoman, 2005).

The Development of Information and Communication Technology

Over the past decade, the digital communication era saw much development in Information and Communications Technology (ICT). EFL teaching and learning in higher education then change teaching and learning are enabled by VR, AR and AI chatbots. Learning flexibility enjoys more possibilities to be maximized through richer learning experiences.

Enhancing learning effectiveness, ICT creates and merges the content of EFL in a new way that promotes; the teaching plan and curriculum, the instructional means and assessment methods are to be adjusted in the long run. To be specific, in flipped classrooms, pre-lecture individual learning tasks could be well achieved through spherical video-based immersive virtual reality (SV-IVR). If EFL learners adopted an intensive theory application strategy, they would achieve higher academic results. Social presence framework (interpersonal, open and cohesive communication) facilitated learning especially in EFL listening tasks; and AI systems supported teacher-student interaction, fostering learner engagement online and improving examination scores and problem-solving competence (Cheung et al., 2023). When it comes to feedback, ICT provides some good quality technology-enhanced EFL feedback.

Theories Applied in EFL Teaching

EFL teaching in China has undergone five distinct periods, each of which has had a significant impact on EFL pedagogy (Rao, 2013). During the first and second periods, the Grammar-Translation Method and Intensive Reading were widely adopted, reflecting China's traditional language teaching methods. These methods prioritized the cultivation of reading and translation skills, treating English learning as a process of memorizing rules or facts to manipulate language morphology and syntax. The original goal was to learn English to read literature or to improve mental discipline and intellectual development (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

In the third period, the Audio-Lingual Method was introduced with a focus on developing learners' oral skills. However, this approach had limited success due to a lack of training and fear of losing face. In the fourth period, English teaching textbooks were criticized for their inauthentic content, especially for "slogans" and "quotations" that were irrelevant to the societies and cultures of English-speaking countries.

Following the period of reform and opening policy, the EFL emphasis shifted towards developing learners' linguistic and communicative competence. Reformers such as Vietor and Sweet believed that natural learning occurs in meaningful contexts, from EFL listening to writing. Current research also supported the effectiveness of a "top-down" instructional approach rather than a "bottom-up" approach (Xu, 2022). EFL teaching now also considers learners' cultural backgrounds and mother tongues (Carter & Nunan, 2001).

EFL teaching approaches are influenced by three major theoretical views: the traditional structural view, which regards language as a system of structurally related elements for the coding of meaning; the functional view, which views language as a vehicle for the expression of functional meaning; and the interactional view, which sees language as a means of realizing interpersonal relations and social transactions between individuals (Richards & Rodgers, 2001).

Learning theories associated with EFL teaching methods may emphasize an exploration of psycholinguistic and cognitive processes involved in EFL and the conditions required to activate

the learning process. Thus, in the post-method era, interdisciplinary theories are becoming increasingly important for EFL teaching.

Social Acquisition

Language acquisition is an ongoing process that can be divided into two phases: the pre-competent and post-competent phases (Schilhab, 2015). Schilhab (2002, 2004) posited that both advanced cognitive abilities and social interactions are crucial to human language acquisition, with the former working bottom-up and the latter top-down. This view is supported by Collins (2010) and Hasse (2008, 2015), who emphasized the importance of social sensibility in absorbing social rules and improvising through social embedding. The “social turn” (Block, 2003) highlights the critical role of the social context in shaping and influencing learner cognition, shifting SLA or EFL research focus from the process of language learning to the language learning environment (Wang, Zhang, & Long, 2022), aspects of language learners (Shi, 2014; Wang, 2022), etc.

Language is considered a system for communication, and the interrelation between language and social cognition has been the subject of intense debate. Wang et al. (2022) suggested that it was worthwhile to explore how the virtual environment influences SLA processes, as learners' surrounding environment could influence their language acquisition. Moreover, Shi (2014) stressed the importance of learners' intercultural communicative competence, while Wang (2022) emphasized the value of learners' affective variables in the social network of classroom learning. Shi (2014) pointed out that integrating cultural communication content directly and systematically into foreign language syllabi and textbooks could promote the simultaneous development of foreign language skills and intercultural communicative competence.

Methods

A semi-structured interview was conducted in the study to address the adverse effects of teaching English as a Foreign Language in Chinese higher education and the ways to improve its instruction. One significant advantage of using semi-structured interviews is that it allows for a focused interview while still providing the researcher with the flexibility to delve into relevant topics that may arise during the interview process (Adeoye-Olatunde & Olenik, 2021). This can lead to a deeper understanding of EFL teaching in Chinese tertiary education being evaluated.

Participants

The research, undertaken by the committee of the School of Foreign Languages at Wenzhou University in China during the academic year of 2022-2023, has been subject to institutional ethical guidelines and protocols, which were approved before the commencement of the study. Informed consent was obtained from all participants who voluntarily took part in the study, and their interview responses were kept anonymous.

The study employed snowball and criterion sampling methods to recruit 20 English teachers with a minimum of one year of overseas experience and over three years of EFL teaching experience in higher education in China. The participants' teaching experience ranged from two to 35 years, with an average of four years of overseas experience. The gender distribution was 60% male ($n = 12$) and 40% female ($n = 8$), while 13 participants held Ph.D. degrees, and the remaining seven held Master's degrees (see Table 1 in Appendix A).

Research Instruments

In the present study, a semi-structured interview was utilized (see Appendix A), which consisted of a set of optional questions that could be asked depending on the flow of the conversation (Dearnley, 2005). The semi-structured interview questionnaire comprised seven questions, of which questions one, six, and seven were optional and contingent on the timing of the interviews.

After obtaining permission from the relevant educational authorities, teacher participants were interviewed using a semi-structured format. The researcher followed the guidelines of the interviews strictly. Interviews were conducted either in the teachers' rooms or online and lasted between 15 and 20 minutes. Each interview was recorded or transcribed directly, and each participant was assigned a pseudonym. The study's purpose was explained to the participants initially, and the required questionnaires were related directly to the teachers' opinions on teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) in higher education in China.

Data Analysis

The study utilized thematic analysis (McKillop, McCrindle, Dimitropoulos, & Kovacs, 2017) to analyze the interviews. Inductive data analysis was performed to gain new insights into reality (Arnborst, 2017). To scrutinize the open-ended questionnaire, content analysis methodology as outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008) was followed. The researchers conducted an iterative analysis of the data to identify new themes and then carried out unstructured categorization and open coding procedures (refer to Table two).

Table 2. *Themes and sub-themes extracted from the opinions of the teachers who were assessed*

| Themes | Subthemes |
|-----------------------|--|
| English teaching | Pursuit of a high score Imbalance of teaching resources Reliance on multimedia Much focus on one specific language skill Teachers' influence |
| English self-Learning | Lack of exposition to English Access to media Intercultural communication Doing regular practice Fostering interest |
| Education system | Disconnection of different grades Test-oriented education |
| language competence | Speaking difficulty Reading narrowly Weak writing skills Listening difficulty Intercultural capability |

Results

Thematic Analysis of the Answers Given by the Participants

According to the thematic analysis of the data, there were four main themes for classifying the teachers' opinions on English education in China: (1) English teaching; (2) English self-learning; (3) Education system; (4) Language competence. The themes respectively covered subthemes. The category system used in the thematic analysis is shown in Table 2 above.

English Teaching

Generally speaking, the teachers affirmed that English teaching needed reform like changing the test-oriented teaching, helping students develop critical thinking, teaching practical English for real use in life, and so on. They also admitted that teachers usually had a great influence on students.

-Pursuit of a high score. The teachers' opinions linked performance in entrance exams with degrees and other qualifications. This could be reflected in the answers to the question "What do you think are the fundamental problems in English education in China?":

"The problem with English teaching in China is that Chinese students have so many exams. Whether their English learning was qualified or not is weighed upon the scores they received in the exams. But it did not really mean their language proficiency." (Interviewee 3)

-Imbalance of teaching resources. The teachers consented that due to the wide scope of Chinese regions, teaching resources could not be evenly distributed.

"China is a big country, places varying from each other... Teaching resources are unevenly distributed. For example, some places have native English teachers, while other places don't. Some places have groups of experienced, proficient teachers, while others don't." (Interviewee 18)

-Reliance on multimedia. According to the teachers, Chinese learners were greatly restricted by the lack-of-English environment, so multimedia were applied in classroom teaching to increase the chance of exposition to English. But instead, some side effects were caused. "At my age, there were few distractions from learning like the online interactions" (Interviewee 6)

-Much focus on one specific language skill. The teachers' opinions linked the problems students face in learning English with teaching focus and approach. "The biggest headaches for English teaching in China are making use of the unevenly allocated teaching resources in developing some specific language skill." (Interviewee7) "We are not capable of teaching Chinese children the real skills of writing, reading comprehension, or even communicating." (Interviewee 5)

-Teacher's Influence. Teachers were recognized to have played a great role in learning at the stages of higher education. "When I was a third-year student, I started to explore the meaning of my English name because of a teacher." (Interviewee 6)

English Self-learning

The teachers proposed that the improvement of English proficiency could be realized via persistent, regulated and systematic self-learning. Within the new era of high technology, learning had become diversified, fragmented and interdisciplinary. It meant that learners objected to doing wider and deeper learning using advanced self-learning devices and multichannel information. They had to teach themselves to expose to English and to apply English to use.

-Lack of exposition to English. The teacher had the consensus that the insufficient exposition to English was the reason why Chinese learners could not express themselves in English. "You could have a good master of English in China, but I am sure that you must have made much more effort to do so. It's known to us that in China unless you work in a foreign company, you seldom have the opportunity to use English in daily life." (Interviewee 16) "In my hometown, there are few foreigners living here. So, we don't have many opportunities to communicate with foreigners directly, but more in school education." (Interviewee 4) "I used to

work as a part-time interpreter many years ago. Now I only speak English when I give students lectures.” (Interviewee 11)

-Access to media. The teachers believed the less-exposition-to-English learning environment can be changed by using media. For example, one could find someone to chat with in English on some social media like Twitter, YouTube, and the like. “I went on the Internet in the hope of finding people that I can practice speaking with.” (Interviewee1) Or one could refer to online courses for information. “College students can learn English through the online platform such as MOOC.” (Interviewee4) Or one could learn to make use of Apps on the phone. “Apps on the phone can help you to form the habit of memorizing words.” (Interviewee 1)

-Intercultural communication. The teachers agreed with the opinion that English was just a tool of communication, so they proposed immersed English learning environment was a good way to learn English efficiently. They attributed it to intercultural communication. “If you want to learn something deeply, you probably need to move to another country. Learning English helps you to broaden your horizons, broaden your viewpoint.” (Interviewee3) “Imagine that, when one was in the US, where you could only refer to the Americans for help, then your English could be greatly improved.” (Interviewee 15)

-Doing regular practice. Putting language into practice is a crucial aspect of enhancing language proficiency, particularly in speaking and listening. The teachers suggested that habitual practice ensured a good master of language skills. “I entered out finding 20 to 30 people with whom I would practice English regularly across that period of 2 or 3 years...Speaking practice only makes you more fluent in what you have already acquired.” (Interviewee 1) “If you think about it, if you want to be good at anything, you need to practice...You have to keep practicing, and eventually, you’ll be good.” (Interviewee 18) “So you created most of your language environment for yourself. At that time, I took out all the IELTS listening materials I had learned before. ... I wrote down everything he said, whether it was useful or not. So during that time, my listening had changed a lot in three months.” (Interviewee 8)

-Fostering interest. It’s well-recognized that interest is a good teacher. The teachers accepted this idea well and reinstated that learning with interest could make things half done.

“It’s true that learning is a painful process, but learning English can be enjoyable. For example, you can learn English in an interesting way by means of watching English TV plays and dramas or listening to English songs or news. Honestly speaking, if you think what you are doing is fun, it will be easier for you to keep on doing and in the meantime, enjoy what it brought you, like happiness and knowledge.” (Interviewee 2)

-Personal initiatives. The teachers believed personal initiatives were critical to English learning in China. “I think that we should take the initiative to learn, to search for the information, to contact the teacher, etc.” (Interviewee 10)

Education System

-Disconnection among different grades. It was known that there were lots of repeated teaching contents across different grades of the education system. The teachers criticized this disconnection and low efficiency it caused.” “All the English teachers need to think deeply about what differences in different grades, how to connect, and whether it was reasonable to differentiate the grades and the teaching materials.” (Interviewee 7)

-Test-oriented education. The teachers agreed that Chinese education was test-oriented, which led to elite education.

“Chinese test-oriented education pushed students to go all out for talent selection tests such as the national college entrance examination and to regard getting advanced degrees as the ultimate objective. It gave rise to the misunderstanding that scores were the criterium to evaluate students, teachers and schools.” (Interviewee 11)

Language Competence

The teachers unanimously agreed that Chinese learners had much space to improve their language competence, such as speaking difficulty, listening difficulties, narrow reading, weak writing skills and intercultural capability.

-Speaking difficulty. The length of learning was thought unproportionate to speaking competence. The teachers claimed that English learners in China were unable to speak fluently because of a few occasions and the need to use English. In addition, lack of confidence was also one of the causes.

“Then when I was a freshman in college, I would constantly get frustrated by the fact that I could not speak a word of English, even after all those years of learning...Like the majority of English learners in China, I started to learn English from the years in primary school. Though I could get high scores in exams, my English proficiency was still far from the need for overseas study. I could not understand what the other people said. What’s more, I was short of vocabulary to express myself.” (Interviewee1)

“Chinese little boys dare not open their mouth casually, who dares to raise their hands, not only to face normal eyes but also to face the evaluation of the surrounding students, who dare to pronounce it, who dares to read it, with what accent, someone will evaluate” (Interviewee5) “Because of lacking confidence, exercise environment, and partners, I felt nervous when I spoke in English.” (Interviewee 2)

-listening difficulties. Listening weakness was one particular point mentioned in the teachers’ interview. “When I went to the English-speaking country for the first time, I could hardly understand what I heard.” (Interviewee 9)

-Narrow reading. Among the language skills, reading was mostly criticized by the teachers as “I thought that English learners in China were weak at listening and speaking, but barely ok at reading and writing.” (Interviewee5) “The extracurricular reading materials were mainly reports or transcribed exercises.” (Interviewee7)

-Weak writing skills. Reading and writing are believed to be correlated. The teachers commented that “It’s criticized that students from the elite schools could not read the original English literature and compose an English thesis, even though they had passed the CET 4 and CET 6.” (Interviewee 5)

-Intercultural capability. Language learning is for practical use, which is in accordance with conviction and custom. The intercultural capability of Chinese students was commented as: “In my opinion, under the test-oriented education system, Chinese students could not fluently interact with foreigners. At present, though Chinese English education was still suitable for the majority of students, there was still a great gap in fluent intercultural communication.” (Interviewee 15) “English teaching in China could only improve my script writing skills, but when I studied overseas, I could hardly understand what those people said and I could not express myself either.” (Interviewee 2)

-Adaptive. The teachers valued tolerance for accents in intercultural communication. “I tell my students it doesn’t matter if you say it differently as I do. We all sound different...You are

Chinese. You are supposed to sound Chinese.” (Interviewee6, 12) “As long as you can write such a high level of articles, what is the use of your pronunciation?” (Interviewee 5)

Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate teachers’ opinions on the side effects of EFL teaching in Chinese higher education. The result of the data analysis indicated two main side effects of EFL teaching in Chinese higher education: first, the Chinese learners were unable to apply English in actual communication due to a lack of exposition to English; second, there was a prevailing concept that the higher score the better college and career. In terms of the way to improve the effectiveness of EFL teaching in Chinese higher education, data analysis revealed that learners’ self-learning skills and self-regulation were critical for successful English learning.

After the analysis carried out, the results generally showed that the teaching staff considered the critical and positive role of learner’s self-learning skills, self-regulation and interest in the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context in China, which was also recognized in the previous studies (Peng, 2021; Liu & Zhong, 2022). They commented on 4 aspects: English teaching, learners’ self-learning, the English education system and learners’ language competence.

It was also shown that “Deaf and dumb” English learners were highly related with a focus on grammar, vocabulary, and written language in practical teaching, which was also found in the previous research (Zhang & Sun, 2022; Zhang & Zhang, 2021) The teachers also admitted that successful learning was highly related with academic motivation due to their recognition of hardship and long-term effort in learning a foreign language, which is in line with the findings in previous studies (Bo Zhang, 2022; Teng & Zhang 2016). “Test-oriented” teaching and learning were deemed to lead to the stereotyped idea that a higher score ensured better education and ample rewards among all the hierarchy of education.

Thus, the teachers gave suggestions on exposition to English with the use of multimedia in class and off class, which help students embrace English language skills and develop intercultural understanding, global outlook and so on. This was also seen in the previous research (Huang, Qi & Xie, 2022; Hu, 2019; Sendek, Herzmann, Pfeifer, & Lai, 2022) affirmed that the environment of language acquisition and communication had an impact on both sides of social interaction. Language learning was more likely to be accomplished in social interaction, involving social interactions, behavioral effects, emotional expression, affiliation with the same group, course content exchange, sharing of knowledge, or personal appraisal of each other (Wang, 2022).

Teachers also identified the role of teachers in the motivation of students, which was following the statement that language learners were usually intrinsically and extrinsically motivated, and strongly motivated students with long-term goals were easier to teach (Harmer, 1991). The teachers’ opinion was also corresponding to the previous research (Hua He 2021), proving that educators’ devotion and attention to students motivated them more and helped them cultivate independence and self-efficacy in learning.

In addition, the teachers also criticized the present prevailing misunderstanding of English proficiency in speaking, not accuracy of pronunciation but intercultural capability, which was in line with the findings in the previous studies (Marjerison & Yang, 2022). It was also revealed that higher English learning was sustainable, enjoyable, motivated and fragmented, and most of the learning was high-tech assisted, which also coincided with the results of other investigations (Shadiev, Wang, Halubitskaya & Huang, 2022; Zheng, 2022; Cui & Li, 2022).

In short, the EFL education in China was insufficient in language exposition and focused on test scores, but teachers' enthusiasm for teaching and learners' initiative in learning English indeed accounted for successful learning.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides significant insights into the adverse effects of EFL teaching in Chinese higher education and the ways to improve its instruction. The findings suggest that English deficiencies among EFL learners can be attributed to the English teaching curriculum, self-directed learning, and the education system. To address these issues, the development of self-directed learning skills and self-regulation is crucial for the effective application of language in authentic contexts. Additionally, social interaction plays a crucial role in language learning, emphasizing the importance of behavioral effects, emotional expression, affiliation with the same group, course content exchange, sharing of knowledge, or personal appraisal of each other. However, the study's limitations should be noted, and the results should be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless, this study contributes to the existing research on EFL teaching in China, and future research should involve administering large-scale questionnaires to further validate the findings. In addition, new Information Communication Technologies, such as ChatGPT, could be utilized in EFL teaching to enhance the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

About the authors

Dr. Xiaoshu Xu (Ph.D.) is an associate professor at the School of Foreign Studies, Wenzhou University. She is the Editor in Chief of the Journal of Educational Technology and Innovation. She has published papers on higher education, Personal Learning Environments, and teacher development in SSCI journals. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0667-4511>

Dr. Yujie Su is currently a lecturer at the School of Foreign Studies, Wenzhou University. Dr. Su has published articles on teachings and language research, covering topics of contrastive study between Chinese and other languages, corpus-based studies of vocabulary, online writing automatic correction and other linguistic-related issues. <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1444-1598>

Lu Xu is a senior lecturer at the School of Foreign Studies, Wenzhou University. Her research interest is in higher education, TESOL with applied linguistics, and teacher development. She has joined research in online learning in higher education, Self-regulated Learning, and EFL teaching in Asian countries. <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-7963-3358>

Dr. Yunfeng Zhang is an associate professor as the Director of the Centre for Portuguese Studies, Macau Polytechnic University (MPU). He received Ph. D. in Linguistics at the University of Coimbra, Portugal. He has published books and journal papers in the fields of Translation & Machine Translation, education, etc. <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-9995-8432>

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Appendices

Appendix A

Table 1. *Personal information of interviewees*

| No. | Gender | Teaching experience | Degree | Overseas experience (year) |
|-----|--------|---------------------|--------|----------------------------|
| 1 | Male | 3 | Ph.D | 7 |
| 2 | Male | 2 | Ph.D | 6 |
| 3 | Male | 11 | Ph.D | 4 |
| 4 | Female | 9 | MA | 3 |
| 5 | Male | 30 | Ph.D | 3 |
| 6 | Female | 20 | MA | 2 |
| 7 | Male | 34 | MA | 3 |
| 8 | Female | 5 | Ph.D | 10 |
| 9 | Female | 18 | MA | 2 |
| 10 | Male | 35 | MA | 4 |
| 11 | Male | 10 | Ph.D | 5 |
| 12 | Female | 10 | Ph.D | 3 |
| 13 | Male | 3 | Ph.D | 2 |
| 14 | Female | 21 | Ph.D | 5 |
| 15 | Female | 19 | Ph.D | 3 |
| 16 | Male | 5 | MA | 2 |
| 17 | Male | 3 | MA | 3 |
| 18 | Male | 20 | Ph.D | 6 |
| 19 | Female | | | |
| 20 | Male | 4 | PhD | 4 |

Appendix B

Semi-structured Interview

1. How old were you when you started to learn English? How long have you studied English?
- *2. How long have you been abroad? How did you feel when you were in the native-speaking environment?
- *3. What kind of language difficulties you encountered when you were abroad?
- *4. What are your opinions on exam-oriented EFL teaching in China?
- *5. What are your suggestions for improving EFL teaching in China?
6. How do you define "good English proficiency"?
7. Can you share with us some interesting oversea experience?