

# The Language Scholar



**2025: Issue 15**

**Edited by Jeanne Godfrey, Alexander Ding, Geoffrey Nsanja and**

**Maria Garcia-Florenciano**

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# The Leeds Language Scholar Journal

The Language Scholar is an open access and peer-reviewed journal. Its main objective is to provide a platform to promote the scholarship of learning and teaching languages.

Contributions are welcome from practitioners, researchers and students who are involved in language education. Areas of particular interest to this Journal are theories and practices for language teaching and education, including language teaching approaches and methodologies, intercultural communication, the psychology of language learning, research-led teaching, student-led practices, communicative strategies and experimental teaching.

The Language Scholar is hosted by the Centre for Excellence in Language Teaching within the School of Languages, Cultures and Societies at the University of Leeds. It considers international contributions in multimedia formats, in and about any language (including ancient languages). It aims to provide a space for the development of scholarship in language education, and to provide a platform for pieces which highlight the potential of multimodality to enhance communication, including a supportive and developmental approach to peer review.

Alongside the annual printed issue, the Language Scholar's digital space hosts and showcases contributions, facilitating the sharing and exchange of ideas. Submissions can be sent to the journal at any time, although there will be deadlines announced for specific printed issues.

If you would like to get in touch or submit a piece, you can contact us on the journal's email: [languagescholar@leeds.ac.uk](mailto:languagescholar@leeds.ac.uk) or Tweet us at [@LangScholar](https://twitter.com/LangScholar).

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## Editorial

Jeanne Godfrey

Welcome to our Spring Issue 15. In this editorial we welcome three new members of our team – two new Joint Editors, Dr Geoffrey Nsanja, and Maria Garcia Florenciano. We also say hello to Dr Cuie Xu who joins us a Journal Manager.

Our previous collection of work was the successful Contexts of Scholarship special issue, and I'd like here to alert readers to the fact that we now have a 'Special Issue Proposals' tab on our website containing guidelines for anyone who thinks they would like to bring together scholarship on a particular theme.

Issue 15 is more humble in size than the last but not in scope, and all four submissions contribute to key aim of this journal, that of supporting and publishing scholarship by practitioners, for practitioners. In the first paper, Joanne Baumber presents us with data on the English as a Foreign Language proficiency of teachers in China and examines the implications of her findings for learners' language development. This is followed by Marc Jones's scholarship on English language learners' acquisition of vowels at a Japanese university, examining different modes and timing of feedback. His discussion on the implications of his data for practitioners includes a reminder that our good practice has to operate within real teaching environments. The third piece of scholarship here is a 'Work in Progress' article by Angelos Bakogiannis at Teeside University UK. Angelos is leading a funded project to develop a framework for inclusive practices in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) teaching and learning. His paper outlines the project's initial findings and planned future actions. Our fourth and final submission in this issue is a review by Charlie Taylor. Taylor both reviews Anderson's 2022 article discussing the SLA nomenclature and presents his own proposal for change.

The scholarship in this issue illustrates our aim to continue developing The Language Scholar as a platform where both researchers and practitioners can critique contexts and practices in our field in a spirit of open and honest debate, publishing work that is 'meaningful and potentially transformational' (Ding 2024).

Jeanne Godfrey

Geoffrey Nsanja

Maria Garcia Florenciano

April 2025.

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Ding, A. 2024. Thought piece Alex Ding, Scholarship and (dis)Illusio: Rereading the Language Scholar Manifesto. *The Language Scholar* **15** pp.7-10.

## Papers



# **Exploring Inclusive Teaching Practices of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Higher Education (HE): Progress, Challenges and Next Steps**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper reports on the progress, challenges, and future directions of a research project investigating inclusive teaching practices in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Higher Education (HE). Funded by BALEAP, the project aims to develop a framework of recommendations to enhance inclusivity in EAP classrooms, improving student engagement, learning outcomes, and academic success. The paper provides a detailed analysis of the project's methodology, including data collection through qualitative surveys and co-production workshops with EAP practitioners. It summarises initial provisional findings while also highlighting and exploring challenges such as sample representativeness, participant engagement, comprehensiveness of data analysis, and cultural competency. The paper concludes by outlining future research actions, including a systematic literature review to complement empirical findings and ensure that the final set of recommendations is robust, evidence-based, and applicable to diverse EAP contexts. This paper contributes valuable insights for educators and researchers interested in promoting inclusivity in EAP and beyond.

**KEYWORDS:** English for Academic Purposes, Inclusive Teaching, Higher Education

## **INTRODUCTION**

This work-in-progress paper presents an update on a BALEAP-funded research project that investigates inclusive teaching practices in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) within Higher Education (HE) (BALEAP, 2021). The project aims to develop a framework of actionable recommendations that enhance inclusivity in EAP classrooms, ultimately improving student engagement, learning outcomes, and overall academic success (Bakogiannis & Papavasiliou, 2023).



Rather than assuming a shared understanding of inclusivity, this study actively explores how different stakeholders in EAP education perceive and define the concept. Recognising that inclusivity may encompass multiple interpretations, the research deliberately refrained from adopting a predefined working definition. This decision ensured that participants could freely articulate their own perspectives, allowing the study to capture a diverse range of views.

By embracing this open-ended approach, the project seeks to reflect the complexity of inclusivity in EAP education and translate these varied insights into a comprehensive and contextually relevant framework of recommendations. In doing so, it acknowledges the multifaceted nature of inclusivity and ensures that the proposed framework is representative of the perspectives and experiences of those engaged in EAP teaching and learning.

This project addresses both the pedagogical and structural challenges of inclusivity faced by non-native English-speaking students and EAP practitioners working with them in university settings, aiming to create more equitable learning environments for EAP in HE. EAP students often encounter distinct barriers related to language proficiency, cultural differences, and academic expectations, which necessitate tailored teaching approaches that extend beyond general inclusivity practices. Tutors working with these students must be able to identify such challenges and develop strategies to effectively support them, such as providing differentiated instruction, fostering culturally responsive teaching practices, and offering targeted language support. Institutions should also facilitate this process by offering professional development opportunities, creating inclusive curricula, and ensuring access to resources that promote linguistic and cultural inclusivity, thus fostering a more supportive and adaptable learning environment for all students.

By focusing on inclusive teaching practices, specifically within the EAP context in HE, this ongoing project addresses a critical gap in the literature offering valuable insights for educators. Its outcomes have the potential to significantly enhance support for non-native English-speaking students, equip tutors with effective strategies, inform institutional policies, and provide the BALEAP community with evidence-based practices for fostering inclusivity in diverse learning environments.

**CONTEXT AND RATIONALE**

The need for teaching and learning approaches that prioritise inclusion and equity in higher education (HE) has been widely studied, with these concepts forming a central theme in research by scholars, practitioners, and policymakers (Dewsbury & Brame, 2019; Shaeffer, 2019; Stentiford & Koutsouris, 2021). The literature emphasises the importance of broadening participation (Bradley & Miller, 2010) and fostering academic cultures that respect and value diverse learners, promoting inclusive educational environments (Ouellett, 2005; Grace & Gravestock, 2009).

While much of the research on inclusive education focuses on access for students with learning disabilities or difficulties (Fuller et al., 2004; Riddell et al., 2007), there is increasing recognition of the impact of intersecting identities, such as ethnicity, socio-economic status, and religion, on learning (Cole & Ahmadi, 2010; Devlin et al., 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2014). This body of work situates inclusion as a global educational priority, aiming to increase participation and achievement among historically marginalised groups, ultimately transforming HE into a socially just pedagogical space (Ainscow et al., 2006).

Inclusive education is defined as a teaching approach that celebrates diversity, ensuring all students can access course content, actively engage in learning activities, and demonstrate their potential during assessments. It aims to safeguard legal rights and prevent discrimination based on age, gender, ethnicity, religion, disability, or sexual orientation (Equality Challenge Unit, 2013). Scholars broadly agree that inclusion requires systemic transformation, rooted in principles of social justice (Lipsky & Gartner, 1996). However, the concept remains elusive, with varied definitions and practices across literature and educational contexts, leading to inconsistent implementation.

In language teaching, particularly in the TESOL field, research has largely addressed social justice issues like racism and the de-silencing of race (Kubota & Lin, 2006; Von Esch et al., 2020) or postcolonial practices to counter settler colonialism (Lin & Luke, 2006; Sterzuk & Hengen, 2019). Recent studies have explored designing content that integrates social justice principles (Mortenson,

2022). Empirical recommendations advocate for teaching practices that emphasise equity and inclusion in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) instruction, drawing on social justice pedagogy and data such as classroom observations and interviews (Mortenson, 2021; 2022). However, these recommendations are limited by a lack of extensive evidence, underscoring the need for further research.

The project presented here on inclusive EAP teaching in HE aims to bridge these gaps by critically exploring the conceptualisation, benefits, and strategies for fostering social justice in pedagogy. Engaging a range of stakeholders, this initiative seeks to create a comprehensive framework for inclusive practices that address existing disparities. By synthesising diverse perspectives and examining frontline teaching practices, the project aspires to advance equity in HE, offering practical tools to ensure inclusive education is effectively enacted across varied contexts.

## **PROGRESS SO FAR**

### **Methodology**

The project followed a sequential (two-phase) qualitative research design (Morse, 2010) comprising an initial online qualitative survey (Braun et al., 2020) and a series of co-production workshops (Hickey, 2018) during which co-production focus groups were conducted. Both phases were designed to align with the inclusive nature of the research topic, not only in terms of content but also in terms of methodological choices, fostering participant engagement and collaboration throughout, as detailed below.

#### *Phase 1: Qualitative Survey*

The decision to begin with an online qualitative survey targeting EAP practitioners was driven by the exploratory nature of the project and the need to gather detailed, nuanced insights. Unlike quantitative methods, which could have provided broader statistical trends, qualitative surveys allow for the capture of complex, subjective experiences (Denzin and Lincoln, 2017). This is particularly important in the context of inclusivity, where individual perspectives and unique challenges vary widely depending on institutional contexts, personal teaching styles, and the diverse needs of students. The richness of qualitative data is critical in unpacking the barriers that EAP practitioners encounter, as well as the strategies they already employ or could develop to foster

inclusivity. This choice aligns with the overall aim of the research to explore areas that are underrepresented in the literature, where generalisations and trends would not have been as valuable as deep, context-specific insights.

The selection of participants using convenience and snowball sampling methods was a practical choice to facilitate recruitment, especially given the often-difficult access to EAP practitioners across a range of institutions (Etikan et al., 2016). While these sampling methods are efficient for building an initial participant pool, they inevitably raise concerns about representativeness. Inclusivity-focused research must consider the diversity of perspectives it captures, as the goal is to understand challenges across various teaching environments and cultural contexts. Acknowledging this limitation, the survey was designed to minimise potential bias by inviting responses from practitioners in various roles, from program leads to learning developers, to capture a wider array of experiences. This allowed the research to account for differences in institutional structures, teaching responsibilities, and engagement with EAP students, which is critical to producing a comprehensive set of findings.

For data analysis, Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for thematic analysis was selected due to its flexibility and robustness in handling qualitative data. Thematic analysis is particularly suited to the aims of this project because it allows for the systematic identification of recurring themes, patterns, and anomalies across diverse data sources. This flexibility made it an ideal choice for analysing the rich, varied insights gathered from the co-production focus groups, where participants contributed a range of perspectives on inclusivity in EAP classrooms. By applying this method, the project could uncover both the common barriers EAP practitioners face in fostering inclusivity and the nuanced ways in which they navigate these challenges. The ability of thematic analysis to capture both shared experiences and individual variations aligned with the project's goal of developing a detailed, context-specific understanding of inclusivity in EAP.

The strength of thematic analysis lies in its capacity to offer a deep, interpretive understanding of qualitative data (Nowell et al., 2017), which was essential for this project's focus on inclusivity. The method not only allowed for the identification of broad themes - such as structural barriers or

pedagogical challenges - but also enabled a more granular exploration of how different EAP practitioners approach these issues based on their unique contexts. This depth was crucial for ensuring that the recommendations to be developed would be both relevant and adaptable to various EAP settings. Moreover, thematic analysis supports an iterative process of reflection and refinement (Braun and Clarke, 2006), which was integral to this project as it progressed from identifying barriers to co-creating actionable solutions. This iterative nature ensured that the themes generated from the data would directly inform the practical outcomes of the research, reinforcing the participatory and inclusive ethos of the project.

However, careful consideration was given to the limitations inherent in the sampling and data collection process. While the thematic analysis provided valuable insights, it was important to ensure that the findings were interpreted within the context of the sample and not generalised beyond its scope. The project's sample, though diverse, may not represent the full spectrum of experiences within EAP teaching, particularly across different cultural and institutional settings. Despite these limitations, the qualitative nature of the data combined with the rigor of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis framework offered a solid foundation for moving forward. The insights gleaned from this phase of the project provided a well-informed basis for the next steps, which aim to transition from understanding barriers to developing concrete, practical recommendations for enhancing inclusivity in EAP classrooms. This careful balance of flexibility, depth, and rigor in the data analysis process strengthens the credibility of the project's findings and ensures their relevance to the wider EAP and HE community.

### *Phase 2: Co-Production Workshops*

The decision to run co-production workshops using co-production focus groups (Van Eijk and Steen, 2016), which combined elements of both nominal group technique (Van de Ven and Delbecq 1972) and traditional focus groups (Stewart et al., 2007), was a strategic methodological choice for this project. Co-production focus groups are designed to foster collaboration and inclusivity, aligning with the project's overarching goal of creating more equitable teaching practices in EAP. In this format, participants are not just respondents but active contributors to the research process, blending the structured approach of nominal group technique - where individual ideas are generated and prioritised—with the open discussion format typical of traditional focus groups. This hybrid method was chosen to ensure that all voices, regardless of assertiveness or confidence, were heard

and valued, reflecting the core principles of inclusive teaching. By incorporating the more egalitarian structure of nominal group technique, the co-production focus groups allowed participants to take ownership of the outcomes, embodying the project's commitment to inclusivity both in research and in educational practice.

Unlike traditional focus groups, which primarily focus on eliciting opinions through facilitated discussion (Stewart et al., 2007), co-production focus groups aim to generate concrete outputs through a combination of individual reflection and group dialogue. In traditional focus groups, discussions can sometimes be dominated by more vocal participants, which risks marginalising quieter voices (Moore et al., 2015). By integrating nominal group techniques, this method ensured that each participant had the opportunity to contribute individual insights before group discussion took place. This approach was particularly relevant to the EAP context, where participants come from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and some may feel less comfortable speaking in open group settings. By giving space for individual idea generation, followed by collaborative discussion, the co-production focus groups encouraged a more balanced and inclusive process of developing recommendations for inclusive teaching. This methodological choice directly supports the project's aim to reflect the diverse perspectives of EAP practitioners in the final framework.

Conducting the co-production focus groups online allowed for wider participation, but it also posed challenges in terms of engagement and ensuring equal contribution from all participants (Kenny, 2005; Koch, 2013). To address these challenges, several strategies were implemented to enhance inclusivity. The structured component of the nominal group technique helped to ensure that all participants had an opportunity to contribute their ideas in writing before group discussion began, mitigating the risk of certain voices dominating the conversation. Meanwhile, the traditional focus group format allowed for dynamic interaction and deeper exploration of key themes. Additionally, the use of online platform features, such as moderated chat, timed speaking turns, and anonymous input, ensured that participants could engage on their own terms. These features were essential to creating an inclusive environment, allowing for a diversity of voices and perspectives to shape the final set of recommendations. This blended approach provided both structure and flexibility, making it an appropriate and effective choice for this project's goals.

For data analysis, thematic content analysis (Strauss and Corbin, 1990) was employed to analyze the rich discussions from the co-production focus groups. This approach was selected due to its ability to systematically capture and interpret the depth and complexity of qualitative data, allowing for the identification of key themes related to inclusive teaching practices. Thematic content analysis is particularly well-suited to research that seeks to explore diverse perspectives, as it enables researchers to uncover patterns and themes within the data while remaining flexible enough to accommodate unexpected insights (Nowell et al, 2017). In the context of this project, where participant input was central to developing recommendations for inclusive EAP teaching, this method allowed for a detailed examination of the nuanced views and experiences shared during the workshops.

The choice of thematic content analysis aligns with the project's collaborative and inclusive ethos, as it emphasises the importance of participants' contributions by treating their ideas and perspectives as data that can drive meaningful outcomes. The interactive nature of the co-production focus groups generated a wealth of actionable insights, reflecting the diverse needs and experiences of EAP practitioners. By systematically analysing these discussions, thematic content analysis allowed for the identification of recurring themes that underpin effective inclusive teaching practices. These themes were not only descriptive but also helped to inform the development of practical, context-specific recommendations aimed at enhancing inclusivity in EAP classrooms.

### **Preliminary Findings**

This section presents preliminary findings from the two phases of the project, offering insights into the challenges and strategies related to inclusive teaching practices in English for Academic Purposes (EAP) within Higher Education. The findings from Phase 1, based on the online qualitative survey, highlight key barriers and approaches to inclusivity, while Phase 2 expands on these themes through focus group discussions, providing deeper perspectives from EAP practitioners. Together, these insights can contribute to the development of a comprehensive framework for fostering inclusivity in EAP classrooms.

#### *Phase 1: Qualitative Survey*

The survey revealed two major themes: barriers to inclusion and approaches to inclusion of EAP in HE. Key barriers included a lack of awareness, knowledge, and training among educators, leading to uncertainty in implementing inclusive practices. Prescriptive delivery methods, often dictated by institutional structures, constrained flexibility in addressing diverse student needs. Additionally, a lack of consideration for diversity meant that teaching practices did not always accommodate varied learning styles or cultural backgrounds. Time constraints were another significant issue, with educators feeling pressured to cover extensive curricula, leaving little room for adaptation. Finally, the high cost of EAP courses was identified as a financial barrier that disproportionately affected students from low-income backgrounds, limiting access to inclusive learning opportunities.

To counter these challenges, participants proposed several approaches to fostering inclusion. An inclusive curriculum was highlighted as essential, with adaptations to make content more relevant and reflective of student diversity. Promoting equality and diversity was seen as a crucial strategy to ensure all students felt valued and included. Collaborative learning structures were suggested to enhance engagement, while personalised learning and competency-based progression allowed for flexibility in meeting individual student needs. The importance of student autonomy in shaping their learning experiences was also emphasised. Participants advocated for a supportive classroom environment where students felt safe and empowered to contribute. Additionally, differentiated instruction, culturally responsive teaching, and reflective practice were identified as key strategies to enhance inclusivity. Finally, establishing a procedure for conflict resolution was seen as necessary to maintain an inclusive and respectful classroom atmosphere.

#### *Phase 2: Co-Production Workshops*

The co-production focus groups identified key themes related to inclusive teaching practices of English for Academic Purposes (EAP) in Higher Education, organised into three levels: individual (micro), departmental (meso), and institutional (macro). At the individual level, participants emphasised the need to redefine needs analysis to account for diverse learning styles, cultural backgrounds, and accessibility requirements. Differentiated assignment briefs were also highlighted as essential in allowing multiple pathways to success, ensuring students with varying linguistic and academic skills could engage effectively. Additionally, fostering a classroom environment that actively challenges linguistic and cultural stereotypes was seen as key to promoting inclusivity.



Reflexivity among educators was strongly encouraged, enabling teachers to critically assess their own biases and adjust their practices to better support diverse student populations.

At the departmental level, discussions focused on the importance of decolonising the curriculum by broadening the representation of perspectives and knowledge systems to challenge Eurocentric biases. Embedding EAP into disciplinary courses was seen as a crucial step in ensuring language learning was integrated into subject-specific content rather than treated as an isolated skill. The need for collaboration between EAP tutors and subject specialists was repeatedly stressed, as this would ensure that language support aligns with the specific demands of different disciplines. Additionally, participants advocated for ongoing staff training and professional development, equipping educators with the tools needed to implement inclusive teaching practices effectively and respond to the needs of an increasingly diverse student body.

At the institutional level, key themes revolved around resource allocation and policy changes to support inclusivity on a broader scale. Providing additional time and resources for educators was highlighted as essential, recognising the extra effort required to develop and implement inclusive teaching strategies. Participants also emphasised the need for top-down collaborations, ensuring that institutional leaders, administrators, and educators work together to create a coordinated approach to inclusivity. Finally, introducing equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) and social justice initiatives was seen as crucial in addressing systemic inequalities and fostering an environment where diverse student needs are acknowledged and actively supported through institutional policies and practices.

### **The Role of Academic Literature**

Academic literature on inclusion, inclusive education, and EAP played a central role in the design of both the survey and the co-production workshops. The survey questions were informed by literature addressing barriers to inclusivity in EAP contexts, such as access to materials, resources, and institutions (Moore and Piazza, 2023; Considine et al., 2014). These questions were designed to elicit detailed responses that reflected practitioners' experiences and views on inclusivity, including issues such as representativeness of resources, topics, and languages, equitable support during a degree

course, and the impact of prejudice in teaching or administration. By avoiding prescriptive definitions, the survey allowed participants to highlight the dimensions of inclusivity they found most relevant, which in turn provided a richer dataset for analysis.

Similarly, the co-production workshops employed the same exploratory approach, informed by literature that emphasised the importance of collaboration in inclusive education (Haeger et al., 2021). The workshops did not impose a singular definition of inclusivity but instead invited participants to share their interpretations of the term, rank its various aspects, and discuss actionable strategies for enhancing inclusivity. This inclusive process ensured that strategies and recommendations were grounded in the diverse perspectives and experiences of the participants, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the concept.

## **STRENGTHS & CHALLENGES**

Up to now, the project has presented both significant outcomes and several challenges that shaped its development and execution. A major strength was the collaborative engagement with a diverse range of stakeholders, which contributed to a richer understanding of the complexities surrounding inclusive education. The involvement of various participants - including tutors, team leads, and senior management - provided a broad spectrum of perspectives. This diversity was crucial in examining the nuances of inclusion, particularly in relation to educational practices. The qualitative data collection, through surveys and focus groups, allowed for deep exploration of the experiences and viewpoints of EAP practitioners, offering insights that might not have been captured through quantitative methods alone (Braun and Clark, 2013).

The data from both phases of the project provided valuable insights into the state of inclusive teaching in EAP and highlighted several key areas for improvement. The qualitative survey revealed several barriers to inclusive teaching in EAP classrooms, including limited institutional support, insufficient professional development, and a lack of awareness about inclusive teaching strategies among practitioners. Participants noted the challenge of adapting pedagogical practices to meet the diverse needs of non-native English speakers, particularly in large, heterogeneous classrooms. The data also identified strategies that practitioners are currently using to enhance inclusivity, such as

providing tailored feedback, creating a welcoming classroom environment, and fostering peer collaboration. However, many participants expressed a need for more targeted training on how to implement inclusive practices effectively.

The co-production workshops allowed for a deeper exploration of best practices. Participants collaborated to identify practical solutions to the challenges raised in the survey, with an emphasis on developing inclusive curricula and assessment methods that account for linguistic diversity. In the context, linguistic diversity encompasses the varied linguistic backgrounds and proficiencies of international students, multilingual learners, and those for whom English is an additional language. This diversity is particularly relevant to EAP cohorts, where students bring a range of academic literacies shaped by different educational systems and cultural norms. Addressing linguistic diversity in EAP means creating curricula that not only support language acquisition but also recognise and value the students' existing linguistic and cultural resources. By doing so, the workshops emphasised the importance of designing assessment methods that are fair, equitable, and sensitive to these diverse linguistic repertoires, fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment. The workshops also highlighted the importance of cultural competency training for EAP practitioners, with participants advocating for institutional support to provide ongoing professional development in this area. These findings have been synthesised into two papers, both of which are under review for publication.

Several methodological challenges were also encountered during the research process, particularly in relation to sampling, participant engagement, data analysis, and cultural competency. To start with, the project initially relied on convenience and snowball sampling, which introduced selection bias and affected the representativeness of the sample (Etikan et al., 2016). This issue is particularly problematic in research aiming to capture a wide range of perspectives, as it can skew the data towards more accessible or willing participants. According to Vehovar et al. (2016) non-probability sampling is often criticised for its potential to introduce biases that affect the validity and generalisability of the research findings. Therefore, employing more robust sampling techniques, such as purposive or stratified random sampling, can help mitigate these issues by ensuring that different subgroups within the population are adequately represented. To mitigate potential biases, purposive sampling was introduced in the second phase of the project, which helped ensure that

more diverse and comprehensive data was collected, to ensure the collection of rich, detailed data that enhances the reliability and transferability of findings.

Another important challenge was maintaining consistent participant engagement throughout the online co-production focus groups. While the online format allowed for broader participation, it also presented difficulties in ensuring sustained involvement (Moore et al, 2015). Some participants faced technical difficulties or lacked familiarity with the online platforms, which hindered their full engagement. Moreover, the virtual environment made it challenging to foster the same level of interpersonal connection that might occur in face-to-face settings (Kenny, 2005; Koch, 2013). This lack of personal interaction potentially limited the richness of the discussions, as participants may have been less comfortable sharing their experiences openly. To mitigate these issues, various online platform features, such as moderated chat, were implemented. However, these solutions could not fully replicate the dynamic and spontaneous nature of in-person interactions, leaving some gaps in participant engagement.

Ensuring comprehensive data analysis was yet another challenge, particularly when dealing with qualitative data from diverse sources such as surveys and focus groups (Stewart and Shamdasani 2015). The volume and complexity of qualitative data require meticulous organisation and analysis to draw meaningful conclusions. All data analyses were conducted by the Research Assistant, who was hired for 40 hours in each phase of the project, depending on available funding. The Research Assistant was responsible for analysing qualitative data and drafting the initial results. To ensure the robustness and reliability of the analysis, all work was double-checked for consistency and accuracy. Nearly all aspects of the analysis for the data collected in the second phase of the project were conducted from scratch. This was necessary due to a shift in focus from identifying barriers to providing recommended approaches. The change aimed to prevent repetition or overlap with previously produced and submitted outputs, ensuring that each phase of the research offered distinct and valuable insights. This meticulous approach to data analysis underscores the commitment to producing high-quality, reliable research findings.

Finally, another challenge related to the lack of cultural competency training among the research team, which presented obstacles in managing discussions with participants from diverse cultural backgrounds (Rodriguez et al, 2011). While the workshops were designed to promote an inclusive

environment, the absence of formal cultural competency training limited the team's ability to navigate cultural nuances effectively. This issue is particularly relevant in research focused on inclusion, where the researchers' capacity to understand and engage with diverse perspectives is essential. Without a structured understanding of cultural differences, there is a risk that some participants' contributions could be misunderstood or undervalued, thereby affecting the overall inclusivity of the research process. However, this does not imply an essentialist or static view of culture, as critiqued in Hofstede's frameworks (Hofstede, 1980), where cultures are seen as fixed sets of characteristics. Instead, the research team approached culture as a dynamic, context-dependent, and interactional phenomenon that influences communication and collaboration in nuanced ways. This understanding acknowledges that individuals navigate multiple cultural identities and influences, rather than representing a monolithic cultural archetype. By adopting this perspective, the team sought to critically reflect on their own assumptions and biases about culture, fostering a research environment that prioritises mutual learning and the co-construction of meaning. This approach underscores the importance of flexibility and reflexivity in engaging with cultural diversity to avoid stereotyping and to enhance inclusivity in the research process.

#### **FUTURE DIRECTIONS & NEXT STEPS**

Considering the challenges and limitations identified during the research process, significant efforts have been made to mitigate or resolve these issues to enhance the primary outcome of the project that is to produce a robust set of recommendations for inclusivity in the EAP classroom. Despite the successful completion of the two-phase empirical research, it became evident that primary research data alone would not suffice for developing comprehensive recommendations. To increase the robustness and reliability of this framework, we decided to supplement the primary data with relevant evidence from existing scholarship. As part of this effort, a systematic review of existing literature on inclusive teaching practices and theoretical frameworks in EAP within HE contexts has been initiated. This review serves as a crucial component of the broader research endeavour, providing a comprehensive synthesis of existing knowledge that complements the primary data collected through the two-phase empirical research.

By synthesising and analysing existing literature, this systematic review aims to enrich the findings and support triangulation (Carter et al. 2014), thereby ensuring a more comprehensive set of recommendations. The review will account for approaches and frameworks already recorded in the literature that may not have been identified through the primary research conducted so far. This

integrated approach ensures that the final recommendations are not only grounded in empirical evidence but also aligned with established best practices and theoretical insights from the broader field of inclusive education. This approach of combining empirical data with a systematic review of existing literature will contribute significantly to the advancement of inclusive teaching practices in EAP within HE, fostering a more equitable and supportive learning environment for all students. Through this comprehensive framework, the project will provide actionable, evidence-based recommendations that educators can implement to enhance inclusivity in their classrooms.

Moving forward, a detailed protocol will be drafted and submitted for publication to guide the proposed systematic review. Establishing a systematic review protocol before commencing the actual review ensures methodological rigor, enhances transparency, and minimises potential biases in the review process (Petticrew and Roberts, 2006). This protocol also enables peer feedback and validation of the planned methods, further strengthening the reliability of the review. The protocol has already been registered with the International Database of Education Systematic Reviews.

Efforts will also focus on disseminating the findings produced by the project to date. The results will be shared through presentations at academic conferences, fostering scholarly discourse and facilitating networking with other experts in the field. Workshops or webinars will be conducted, in collaboration with BALEAP, the funder of this work, to engage both practitioners and researchers in the domain. These interactive sessions aim to bridge the gap between research and practice, ensuring that findings are accessible and applicable to the wider BALEAP community.

To ensure that dissemination efforts are themselves inclusive, particular attention will be paid to designing events and materials that accommodate diverse audiences. This includes offering sessions in multiple formats, such as virtual webinars for accessibility, and providing resources in plain language alongside academic presentations. Furthermore, opportunities will be created for feedback and dialogue, allowing participants from varied linguistic, cultural, and professional backgrounds to contribute their perspectives. By adopting these inclusive strategies, the dissemination of work on inclusive teaching can reflect the very principles it seeks to promote, ensuring that it reaches and benefits a diverse and global audience.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, this work-in-progress paper has explored the progress, challenges, and future directions of a wide scale BALEAP-funded research project aimed at enhancing inclusive teaching practices of EAP in HE. The project employed a combination of online qualitative survey and co-production workshops with EAP practitioners to gather rich insights into the barriers and strategies related to inclusivity in EAP classrooms. Through a robust methodology grounded in thematic analysis, the research identified key challenges, with the co-production workshops, designed to foster collaboration and inclusivity, allowing participants to discuss and explore further and generate practical, context-specific solutions. This aligned with the project's goal of developing a comprehensive framework of recommendations.

Moving forward, the project will incorporate a systematic literature review to complement the empirical data, ensuring that the final set of recommendations is evidence-based and applicable to a variety of EAP contexts. The paper underscores the significance of addressing inclusivity within EAP teaching, particularly in terms of meeting the needs of non-native English-speaking students. By combining primary research with a thorough review of existing scholarship, the project aims to produce actionable, well-rounded recommendations that can be used to foster more equitable learning environments in higher education. Through its detailed analysis and focus on inclusive methodologies, this research contributes valuable insights to both educators and researchers striving to improve inclusivity of EAP in HE.

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## Feedback timing affects L2+ perceptual vowel acquisition

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### ABSTRACT

L2+ English vowel perception can be difficult for listeners whose first languages do not have as wide a vowel inventory. This study examines the role of feedback in acquisition of English vowels for perception. The current study was conducted within an intact class at a university in Japan, with a total 34 participants completing sufficient work for inclusion in the study data. After a pretest, two groups took vowel discrimination lessons over four weeks, followed by a post-test one week after those lessons concluded. One group received immediate verbal feedback while another received delayed verbal feedback. Data were analysed through Bayesian t-tests and generalized linear mixed models (GLMM) in order to explore the major factors in pretest to post-test gains. The t-tests resulted in low scores for all vowels, though delayed feedback showed a small effect size. In the GLMMs, group factors contributed more movement to models than timing effects on lesson completion intervals. While the conclusion is somewhat circumspect regarding which feedback timing is most effective for acquisition, the ecological validity of the study being conducted in a classroom means that the transferability of findings is possible, and that the methodology can be repeated across contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** English, feedback, listening, phonology acquisition, vowel

### INTRODUCTION

In the English Language Teaching literature, Jenkins (2000) states that vowel quality is not important for speakers to be understood; however, in order to ensure that language learners reach their potential, sufficient instruction of listening is necessary in order to bring about a more complete phonology which should make the listening process easier. One of the key was that language tends to be taught is through feedback.

This article reports on the findings of a study investigating the effect of feedback timing on perceptual vowel acquisition, that is, the ability to discriminate between vowels. The study was conducted with an intact class at a university in Tokyo. Learners were tested on their perceptual discrimination (ability to recognise the difference between sounds) of the vowels /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɜ:/, and

/ɔ:/ in consonant-vowel-consonant words, and taught the perception of those same vowels, after they were tested again on their perceptual discrimination ability in order to assess whether improvements in discrimination of the target vowels had occurred. Data was collected using a Moodle installation run by the author in face-to-face lessons in 2023 and then analysed between 2023 and 2024. Effects are reported based upon Bayesian t-test and general linear mixed model (GLMM) analyses of pretest and post-test scores as well as class attendance and/or making up of work, the importance of which will become clear as participant attrition is discussed.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Vowel learning**

Learning to understand L2+ speech is important for hearing language learners. The goal for most learners is generally communication, yet if listening skills are suboptimal then communication is hindered. If the target language phonology is not sufficiently acquired and is left unaddressed, a potential outcome is learners becoming demotivated due to a perceived lack of competence (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Demotivation may then lead to a cycle of lowered attention to instruction and thus failure to learn; participation in classes where learning does not occur may even result in foreign language anxiety (Horwitz, Horwitz and Cope, 1986, yet see also Rebusck, 2008 for an opposing perspective). Obviously, such conditions should be avoided as much as possible, which makes the case for providing phonology instruction and/or improving the conditions for phonology to be acquired.

The Perceptual Assimilation Model (PAM) (Best, 1995) was developed in order to explain how a naive listener to an unfamiliar language may categorise the speech sounds in relation to L1: same as L1 category, good fit to L1 category, poor fit to L1 category, uncategorized according to L1. PAM-L2 (Best & Tyler, 2007; Tyler, 2019) built further upon the model, positing that if L1 categorizations allow for successful discrimination of L2 phonemes, learning an L2 categorization is unnecessary because perception occurs at the level of gesture and phonetic level, up to a general phonological abstraction. Evidence supporting this model comes from the differences between L1 Danish and L1 German listeners of L2 English having different categorisations of English approximants, with the Danish listeners more similar to L1 English listeners than the Germans (Bohn & Best, 2012). Conversely, if L1 categorization does not allow learners to effectively discriminate between L2 phonemes, perceptual learning is necessary and therefore categorization needs to be developed for effective listening. In the model, categorization takes place on the same template as L1, i.e., the phonological template is common to all languages. A large amount of input is assumed to be necessary, otherwise L2 learners do not easily develop a phonological model that enables accurate

perception or pronunciation of novel L2 categories. The required amount is estimated to be 6 months in an environment where the language is widely spoken, or much longer in a foreign language learning environment (Best & Tyler, 2007). However, it is not that native-speaker input is necessary; any input that provides differences between L2 categories can provide the basis for acquisition of L2 phonological categories (Tyler, 2019).

The Speech Learning Model (SLM) (Flege, 1995) and Speech Learning Model revised (SLM-r) (Flege & Bohn, 2020) state that learners in a language environment long-term, i.e. migrants, can develop phonetic categories associated with their L2 independent of L1, and that over time these categories may blur together when they are in proximity. The initial SLM hypothesised that age of onset of learning predicts a difficulty in forming separate L2 categories for similar L2 sounds that would be categorised the same in L1 (Flege, 1995). However, the revised model states that late learners are able to discriminate L1-L2 phonetic differences and retain them in memory (Flege & Bohn, 2020). There can be difficulties in learning vowel contrasts according to age of onset. However, the link between age and L2 phonology acquisition are not straightforward. Children may be less likely to consider L1 categories when hearing L2 sounds (Baker et al., 2002). However, other differences that affect acquisition of perception are years of education in the L2 community overall (as opposed to age of arrival in the L2 community), and percentage of L1 spoken/L2+ used (Flege & MacKay, 2004). In particular, the latter findings showed that 32% of experienced L1 Italian learners of L2 English gained scores within two standard deviations of L1 English users regarding vowel contrasts, whereas less experienced university students did not (Flege & MacKay, 2004, p. 20). In the SLM-r, age itself need not be a limiting factor in learning an additional language but is likely to interact with or be confounded by other variables (Flege & Bohn, 2020). With this being the case, adult learners should be able to develop speech categories, but perhaps using different pathways to early learners due to experience and existing learned behaviour.

When applying the PAM and SLM in their practice, teachers and learners need to be aware of the difficulties when studying languages with a larger vowel inventory than their L1. This is due to using L1 categories for L2 being ambiguous and potentially resulting in L2 phonemes being categorised incorrectly. For example, Faris et al. (2018) investigated the acquisition of L2 Danish perceptual vowel categorisations by naive users, who were L1 speakers of Australian English. Where Danish vowels overlap with Australian English vowels, it was found that participants generally categorised the Danish vowels using their L1 categories. Similarly, L1 Japanese listeners of L2 Australian English categorised Australian vowels using L1 categories with speaker-dependent duration (Ingram & Park, 1997). Given these cases, predicting learner categorisations may be based on non-contrasting (and therefore irrelevant) differences. A further consideration to be made is that, according to Polka and

Bohn's (2011) Natural Referent Vowel framework, L2 vowels that are in a more peripheral position in the vowel space (i.e. very closed or very open, and with very back or very front tongue) are more likely to be learned, because they are closer to L1 vowels that are basically universals, which act as referents for other vowels in the vowel space.

The Second Language Linguistic Perception (L2LP) model posits that when adult listeners of an L2+ perceive speech sounds they perceive them at a pre-lexical level (Escudero, 2005; Van Leussen & Escudero, 2015). This is the same as in Optimality Theory (OT; Prince & Smolensky, 2002; see Archangeli, 1999 for an overview); that is, the sounds are not immediately mapped to lexical candidates but instead are mapped to a duplicate L1 phonological template (Van Leussen & Escudero, 2015). In other words, phonological categories are revised as the L2 is learned.

Therefore, in the L2LP, perceptual representations of speech sounds are claimed to result from constraints of the perceptual mappings at the initial state. As exposure is increased to the language, the L2 development state occurs until an end state is reached. In simplified terms, mental categories need the speech signal to actually follow the constraints, else perception is inaccurate, and the speech sounds are not categorised and therefore not parsed (Escudero, 2005). However, with deviations from the constraints, perhaps due to an unknown variety or dialect, perceptual representations may be somewhat malleable, as found in Williams and Escudero (2014).

One important aspect of listening is that, through perception, and in turn attention, the acquisition of language can be facilitated. In doing so, there is an interaction between the act of listening, and acquisition of linguistic items. The Vocab model states that lexical acquisition interacts with phonological acquisition (Bundgaard-Nielsen et al., 2011, 2012). The categorisation of phonemes allows for the accurate decoding of syllables, and lexis. Additionally, lexical knowledge has been shown to mediate learning of vowel categorization for perception of an interlocutor's speech (Felker et al., 2021). However, this is in direct contradiction to Escudero's (2005) LP model, which posits that perception is pre-lexical because the speech signal is attended to prior to parsing of words, with codes used for lexical access after perception. While it may be the case that sounds need to be acquired in order to decode and identify basic words in speech, it is also the case that many L2+ English learners come to the spoken language with a more developed orthographic vocabulary than a spoken vocabulary (e.g. Bonk, 2000; Joyce, 2013). As such, it is likely that these orthographically known words affect acquisition from natural speech both positively and negatively (c.f. Hayes-Harb & Barrios, 2021).

Escudero's arguments (Escudero, 2005; Van Leussen & Escudero, 2015) for perception being a precursor to lexical decoding appear to be sound, based upon prior studies (Baese-Berk, 2019; Crain et al., 2017). Despite the differences between L2LP, PAM-L2 and SLM-r, it is possible to consider an

intermediate stage between perception and lexical decoding where perceived phonemes are given preliminary assignment to lexis, pending verification. Such preliminary assignation may occur as a result of language learners/users testing their personal hypotheses (as with lexicogrammar in Processability Theory, Pienemann, 1999) and experiencing either a perceived successful listening event (through perceived successful comprehension, which may or may not be verified by an interlocutor), or an unsuccessful listening event. In both cases, the perceived phonemes (either correctly or incorrectly perceived) are only one factor in the (lack of) listening success, the others being lexical knowledge, syntax knowledge, and access to semantic knowledge (Rukthong & Brunfaut, 2020; Vafaei and Suzuki, 2020). As such, perceptual phonology may assist in the lexical acquisition process through listening. It is thus the purpose of the study to consider perceptual phonology acquisition and assume that every learner has some differences in their L2+ lexicon.

### **Feedback**

When considering corrective feedback for SLA, many of the findings are described in ways that appear to be universal across syntax, lexis, and phonology systems, and yet this may not be true. Listening and perceptual phonology in particular, may require deeper consideration in the feedback to be implemented due to the fact that output may not be a reliable proxy measure of phonological perception (Winn & Teece, 2021). Thus, greater consideration of assessment procedures are required.

When considering instructed SLA, Lyster and Ranta (2013) stated that “Recasts and explicit correction can lead only to repetition of correct forms by students, whereas prompts can lead either to self-repair or peer repair, not to repetition” (p. 172). However, this may not always be true regarding phonology instruction. Although learners may not always perceive recast or explicit phonological feedback correctly it can provide more input, whereas a prompt may allow learners to realise that their phonological hypothesis was incorrect. As regards perceptual phonology, clearly a prompt is not applicable in this case.

Many studies on phonological acquisition have not included corrective feedback in training because it was assumed that learner inferences would be based upon statistical learning, i.e. based upon exposure to input alone (Lee & Lyster, 2016). It was found that corrective feedback led to listeners accommodating interlocutor’s accent facilitating a speaker-specific vowel shift (Felker et al., 2021, p. 1047). These findings suggest that vowel perception has at least some malleability: learners can substitute phonemic categories or categorizations according to speakers if feedback is provided, although receiving feedback on how a categorization is incorrect appears to be necessary.



**CALL Feedback**

Regarding the timing of feedback, the question of what works needs to be accompanied by the question of for whom? For example, Wang and Young (2012) found that adult learners have preferences for CALL feedback that does not interrupt learning activities (i.e. delayed feedback), but that younger learners have different preferences for feedback. On the other hand, while learner preferences should be taken into account, Wang and Young's study examines only feedback preferences, not feedback efficacy; as such, investigation is needed to understand whether such learner preferences align with what is pedagogically effective.

Regarding aural language, Canals et al. (2020) found that a useful aspect for learners of delayed audio feedback on a speaking task was that they were able to review it several times. The advantages of review are that attention is given to the feedback, which allows learners to 'notice' the difference between their incorrect answer and the intended correct answer (c.f. Schmidt, 1990). This may also be the case for other modalities, and also, potentially for listening instruction.

According to Cardenas Claros (2020), there is a predominance in CALL of feedback falling into a binary of correct and incorrect answers. Yet outside of language teaching and learning, Johnson and Maraffino (2021) state that feedback of correct/incorrect with presentation of the correct answer is also prevalent, and that "the most common forms include knowledge of results (KR) and knowledge of correct response (KCR)" (Ch. 34. p. 3/61). Obviously, these modes of feedback being so prevalent is due to computational limitations. Warschauer and Healey (1998) advocate for applications that provide more detailed feedback that whether or not an answer is correct but for adaptive software that uses pattern recognition algorithms to respond "why it was right or wrong and offering suggestions for further study-going on to a more advanced level or doing some extra work at the current or a previous level" (p. 66). While the use of adaptive software is a conceptually interesting idea, its use in listening seems to be akin to the adage of using a sledgehammer to crack a nut.

Cognitive load dictates that only a limited amount of attention can be given to listening and/or phonological decoding (Sweller et al., 2011). As learners engage mental facilities toward cognitive tasks, such as parsing phonetic information to phonemes, and phonemes to lexis, and lexis to semantic messages, less and less capacity is available for extraneous purposes. However, if feedback given is unrelated to immediate learning objectives, it can potentially be counterproductive to the learning process because learners need to direct attention to the unnecessary information (Johnson & Maraffino, 2021). With these conditions in mind, the importance of not only salient input but also salient, relevant feedback is important in order to have learners process language and the feedback in the most effective way to facilitate acquisition.

Based on research carried out with L2 writing tasks, Rassaei (2019) recommends a plurality of feedback with asynchronous feedback combined with synchronous face-to-face feedback. Flexibility in time and location may not always be positive, because learners can choose to attempt to attend to feedback in suboptimal conditions, but equally classrooms can also be noisy, distracting places which may not always afford sufficient attention to either computer-facilitated feedback or face-to-face teacher feedback.

Fiorella, Vogel-Walcutt and Schatz (2012) suggest that feedback in a spoken modality for simulation-based training tasks results in better decision making than feedback provided by orthographic means. It must be noted that this is related to military training and not language learning, although the cognitive aspects of the feedback may be worth considering. Immediate teacher corrective feedback on pronunciation during L2 speaking tasks provided learners with the means to acquire more perceptual acuity of the /i-l/ contrast. (Zhang & Liao, 2023). Thus, the feedback on learners' own phonological hypotheses can provide input which leads to phonological acquisition. However, regarding the current study, when learning activities are provided through computers or mobile devices, it is not always possible to provide immediate face-to-face feedback.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The potential for vowel acquisition from feedback has not been fully explored. As such, this study explores the following research question:

Does immediate verbal feedback result in higher gains in perceptual vowel acquisition?

The preliminary hypothesis is that immediate verbal feedback results in higher gains in perceptual vowel acquisition. Additionally, the SLA studies generally point to immediate feedback providing greater efficiency to the acquisition process. However, it must be noted that none of the above studies have investigated vowel perception or identification, with the exception of Zhang and Liao (2023).

## **METHODOLOGY**

At a university English Medium Instruction programme in Japan, an intact class of 37 students at approximately CEFR B1-B2 level participated in a quasi-experiment consisting of a pretest, four lessons, and a post-test. All tests and lessons were provided in a Moodle installation on a server run by the author and were conducted in the classroom during a course subject to academic credit. If participants missed a lesson, they were encouraged to complete the lesson outside of class time. The particular design of the study is orthodox in that it measures change over time in test scores based upon a particular intervention or condition.

## Participants

As stated above, the participants come from an intact class of 37, from whom cooperation was elicited. All learners returned consent forms after the study was described in English and being given information sheets in English and Japanese. The activities were integrated into the classes and academic credit was awarded for participation.

Additionally, in using an intact class, ecological validity is maintained, therefore there is internal validity in using a sample drawn from the same community, and moreover, running the two groups at the same time with the same teacher-researcher, allows for factors such as time of day, instructor and classroom environment to be discounted from the data analysis.

From this class, 34 participants were kept. Three participants were removed due to failing to complete either the pretest or post-test. Participants were grouped based on pretest score by pairing similar scores across groups, with 17 participants assigned to the group receiving immediate feedback (Immediate) and 17 participants assigned to the group receiving delayed feedback.

## Tests

Tests consisted of 32 vowel identification items, eight for each vowel /æ/, /ʌ/, /ɜ:/, and /ɔ:/.

Participants listened to each item and then chose the vowel identified. Vowels were not indicated by standard orthography or IPA symbols but by using photographs of iconic images: a cat for /æ/, the Sun for /ʌ/, a bird for /ɜ:/ and a door for /ɔ:/, which minimised the need to rely upon orthography. Participants could listen to each item as many times as they wished, though they were encouraged to choose the answer they were most confident about if they were unsure. Vowel selection tests were chosen as opposed to AXB tests (test identifying the middle stimulus as either the same as the stimulus immediately before or after it) because AXB tests in a pilot study resulted in ceiling effects.

Test materials can be accessed from <https://zenodo.org/records/XXXXXXXXX>

## Lessons

The materials for each lesson were YouTube videos, listed in the Appendix section. These were chosen in relation to the themes of the English for Academic Purposes lessons taught by the author to the participants. Each lesson consisted of four rounds of vowel identification followed by an utterance transcription featuring the vowel in context. The utterance transcription served to benefit the participants by providing a listening task. After the four rounds of vowel identification and utterance transcription, participants summarized the edited video.

The immediate feedback group received recorded verbal feedback after completing each question in the lesson. The feedback provided was given in relation to pattern recognition algorithms that the

Moodle platform allows using RegEx, a type of plaintext input frequently used in web programming and user interfaces for web software. The delayed feedback group were provided with verbal feedback on all correct answers after completing the four rounds of vowel identification and utterance transcription and video summary.

## RESULTS

The raw results show that the gains from pretest to post-test score values overall for the Delayed group were higher than those of the Immediate group. Both groups made losses with the STRUT vowel, and the differences between groups are particularly wide for TRAP. However, the Immediate group made higher gains than the Delayed group with NURSE.

Group	Mean gain	Mean TRAP	Mean STRUT gain	Mean NURSE	Mean THOUGHT
		gain		gain	gain
Delayed	1.56	1.12	-0.188	0.125	0.5
Immediate	-0.412	-0.765	-0.647	0.353	-0.0588

Table 1: Mean pretest to post-test gains of target vowels from immediate and delayed feedback groups

## Statistical Analysis

The data analyses for this study uses Bayesian statistical analysis. The reason for this is the use of small samples, for which Bayesian procedures are generally judged to be more tolerant of. Furthermore, frequentist analyses tend to put too much emphasis on p-values for significance, regardless of the effect. The current study is exploratory work, and therefore conducting null-hypothesis statistical testing is unnecessary. Exploratory work requires cautious reading and interpretation of the results, and any inclusion of p-values tends to make such a philosophical shift a moot point. As such, Bayes factors are reported and are interpreted in general accordance with recommendations by Norouzian et al. (2019).

Paired-sample t-tests were used to analyse the difference in feedback modalities for all the vowels and also overall gains. The t-scores generally have low values overall with correspondingly weak Bayes Factors, mainly at less than anecdotal strength probability. However, the t-score for TRAP gains suggests that delayed feedback is more useful, and this also has a convincing Bayes Factor. As such, the evidence shows that for most vowels, delayed feedback may result in higher gains, particularly TRAP; however, the overall gains Bayes Factor is weak, which suggests that the NURSE

gains t-score skews the overall pattern. NURSE is the only vowel with a positive t-score, although the Bayes Factor is only at approximately anecdotal level.

Description	t-score	Bayes Factor
Overall gains	-1.65	0.919
TRAP gains	-3.17	11.6
STRUT gains	-0.733	0.407
THOUGHT	-1.21	0.579
gains		
NURSE gains	0.435	0.357

Table 2: T-tests of pretest to post-test gains from immediate and delayed feedback groups

The use of a general linear mixed model (GLMM) allows for the detection of weights of factors contributing to the gains in acquisition. The variables tested for are participant, group, mean lesson score, standard deviation of lesson score, and standard deviation of interval between lessons and tests. All Bayes Factors are informative where figures are given. Lesson intervals cannot be said to have a direct influence upon gains, yet the standard deviation of intervals, results in a Bayes Factor that suggests strong evidence for interaction with standard deviation of lesson scores (BF =2.634 x10^-4). However, a similarly strong Bayes Factor in the opposite direction (32.2 at 3 s.f.) was found for gains, condition, participant and individual vowel gains, suggesting no interaction between the factors. Additionally, when mean lesson score was entered into the model, only NA values were obtained. However, for individual vowels, condition, participant and interval standard deviation, strongly informative Bayes factors were obtained (all < 0.2); which suggest moderate evidence for interaction between those factors.

Descriptions	BF
Gains, condition, means and sds of lesson score: no interaction vs interaction	NA
Gains, condition, and sds of lesson score: no interaction vs interaction	0.0002634
Gains, condition, sd of lesson intervals: no interaction vs interaction	NA
Gains, condition, participant and individual vowel gains: no interaction vs interaction	32.1832319
TRAP gains, condition, participant and lesson mean and standard deviation: no interaction vs interaction	NA

Table 3: GLMMs and Bayes Factors for pretest-posttest gains

Descriptions	BF
STRUT gains, condition, participant and lesson mean and standard deviation: no interaction vs interaction	NA
THOUGHT gains, condition, participant and lesson mean and standard deviation: no interaction vs interaction	NA
NURSE gains, condition, participant and lesson mean and standard deviation: no interaction vs interaction	NA
TRAP gains, condition, participant and interval standard deviation: no interaction vs interaction	0.1751258
STRUT gains, condition, participant and interval standard deviation: no interaction vs interaction	0.0613003
THOUGHT gains, condition, participant and interval standard deviation: no interaction vs interaction	0.1410329
NURSE gains, condition, participant and interval standard deviation: no interaction vs interaction	0.1332181

Table 3 (cont.): GLMMs and Bayes Factors for pretest-posttest gains

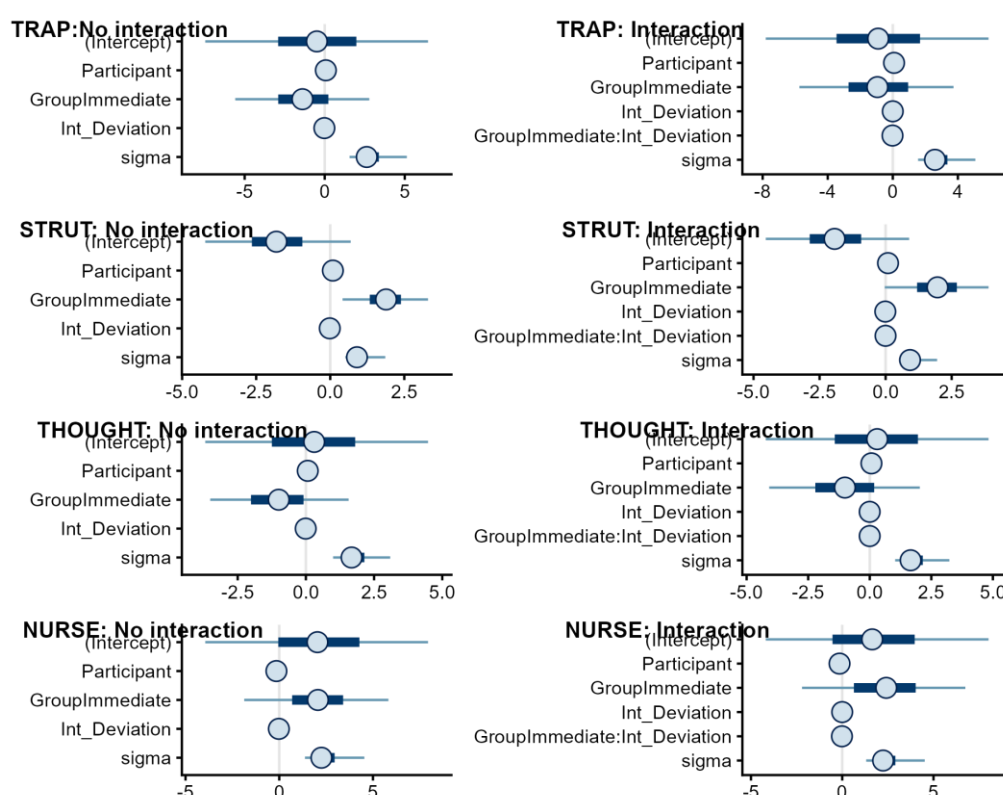


Figure 1: Plots of GLMMs for vowel gains as a function of participant, group and interval standard deviation.

The standard deviation of interval between lessons effect on gains can be seen in Figure 1, where Int\_Deviation is at around 0 on the GLMM plots. However, Group factors (seen in GroupImmediate) play a major part in the GLMM therefore there is an effect on the results, with GroupImmediate values between approximately -1 and 2.5 but notably not at 0. It should therefore be noted that the condition plays a part in gains from pretest to post-test scores, although it may be subject to other different effects.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the results above, it can be concluded that delayed feedback is more likely than immediate feedback to result in perceptual acquisition of L2+ English vowels, as observed in the Group effects in the GLMMs. Furthermore, given the lack of interaction in the GLMMs between Group effects and the standard deviation of intervals between each participant's lesson completion, and the lack of effect in the t-tests, feedback timing is likely to have some effect, despite lower gains (or even losses for the immediate group) if learners cram, or if they are absent. However, the effect on learning gains for individual vowels due to the standard deviation of interval between lessons can be said to have moderate evidence base against interaction, with Bayes Factors well below the ceiling threshold of 1/3 as recommended by Norouzian et al. (2019). Therefore, while the feedback timing of groups did not have a large effect upon t-scores, the Group factor did account for differences in the GLMMs, much more than the standard deviation of lesson intervals.

Regarding individual vowels, it may be seen that gains were readily observed in TRAP (/æ/) and THOUGHT (/ɔ:/) differences, whereas a very small between-groups difference was observed for NURSE (/ɜ:/) and losses for both groups with STRUT (/ʌ/). Due to the more peripheral positions in the vowel space of TRAP and THOUGHT, and the more central positions of STRUT and NURSE, it may be concluded that the Natural Referent Vowel framework (Polka & Bohn, 2011) is supported, albeit tentatively due to the relatively small group size and the attendance issues during the study period.

## DISCUSSION

The results in this study are important for teachers and potentially also TELL materials developers. Feedback modality timing is important and can contribute to rate of acquisition, however it is important to acknowledge classroom realities: learner absences and failure to make up missed work, or not sufficiently spacing missed work, result in cramming. Such cramming of learning activities can turn planned, pedagogically-sound activities into unsound learning practices. The results and conclusion therefore must be interpreted on a case-by-case basis due to potential differences between teaching and learning contexts. However, ecologically valid results can contribute to the

development of knowledge in the SLA and language teaching fields, less through an approach combining findings from several contexts, which may allow for consideration of how and when feedback timing has an effect, and with which types of populations.

In the advent of a global pandemic, absence from class and incomplete hyflex learning activities is likely to be an increasing experience for all educators including language teachers. Absence, is of course, a factor in language learning, because it results in a lack of exposure to the target language, whether in-person, remote synchronous or asynchronous as in distance and blended learning. Furthermore, even if learners make up incomplete tasks, there may be cramming effects, resulting in low gains. In sum, disturbed and/or disrupted exposure to a language is detrimental to its acquisition. However, more research is necessary, and therefore encouraged, in order to investigate the size of any effects, in more usual class attendance situations.

### **Limitations**

Participant attendance greatly affects just how generalizable the findings are across different populations. However, attendance in class cannot be guaranteed, especially when COVID isolation is considered. A further limitation of the current study is that a delayed post-test could not feasibly be carried out. Participant attrition can be a serious issue when working with samples from intact classes, and this is compounded by pandemic situations, due to difficulties in attendance due to infection with a highly contagious disease. The current study was conducted during the pandemic, at a time when in-class teaching with hybrid teaching for those unable to attend was encouraged. However, COVID-19 infection - even when not lethal - can be debilitating, and certainly in 'mild' cases leaves sufferers fatigued. As such, participants infected with COVID were unable, or understandably unmotivated to complete language learning exercises. Additionally, some language learners are more consistent with attendance than others for myriad reasons, which can, again be a factor in participant attrition with intact classes, particularly for completing testing sessions. Furthermore, due to participant attrition, a large sample size could not be maintained. While Bayesian methods are used to mitigate against small sample size (due to the central limit theorem not applying to Bayesian statistics), a larger sample may have resulted in more granularity in the data, thus being more informative. However, the ecological validity of the study being conducted in a classroom means that the transferability of findings is possible, and that the methodology can be repeated across contexts and extended further.

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## **Appendix: YouTube video list**

### **Lesson 1**

IntuitInc. 2012. Lean Startup Lessons: Test Before you Build. [Online]. [Accessed 1 December 2024]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KqtVWzwlfso>

### **Lesson 2**

Startup Amsterdam. 2016. How to give the perfect pitch - with TedX speech coach David Beckett - Young Creators Summit 2016. [Online]. [Accessed 1 December 2024]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Njh3rKoGKBo>

### **Lesson 3**

Dartmouth. 2018. How Playing Games Can Change the World. [Online]. [Accessed 1 December 2024]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h0u4accv15c>

### **Lesson 4**

Wired. 2014. Wired by design: a game designer explains the counterintuitive secret to fun. [Online]. [Accessed 1 December 2024]. Available from: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=78rPt0RsosQ>

## **Investigating the perceived language and teaching proficiency of English language teachers at compulsory education level in China: implications for learners.**

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### **ABSTRACT**

This study aims to address what level of proficiency teachers of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) have in China in terms of language and teaching skills and what effect this could ultimately have on students' English language development.

Chinese English language education is taught privately or unofficially from early-years, and officially from Grade 3 in compulsory education. At this stage, teaching is carried out primarily by Chinese nationals (domestic teachers) in the state system and both Chinese and non-Chinese overseas nationals (foreign teachers) in the private sector. This study is concerned with language and teaching proficiency at compulsory stage education (Grade 3-9) in both the state and private sectors. The study includes two focus groups: domestic and foreign teachers of English, both of whom have a long-held reputation for operating with weak oral English skills or are underqualified (Chen, 2014; Chen & Goh, 2011, Cheng & Wang, 2004; He, 2021; Xu, 2019; Zhao et al., 2015).

The framework for the study adopted an interpretive orientation using a mixed-method approach to collect information – examining available research and distributing a questionnaire (Appendix 3). The data was collected via online platforms and analysed using qualitative thematic analysis methods, as the subject matter dealt with opinion and experience and took a coded latent approach to reveal deeper meaning from the given text and a non-experimental correlational quantitative design to observe the relational variables. Key issues were to understand what qualifications or expertise teachers bring to the

classroom and how this perpetuates the standards of English and English teaching and implications for learners. Findings suggest there are issues with a lack of relevant qualifications and inadequate language proficiency of both foreign and domestic English teachers in China.

**KEYWORDS:** EFL, language proficiency, pedagogy, China, competence, teacher qualifications.

**KEY TERMS:**

**Foreign teacher:** non-Chinese citizen working in China as an English teacher

**Domestic teacher:** Chinese national citizen working in China as an English teacher

**MOE:** Ministry of Education

**Proficiency:** Encompassing English language proficiency and teaching proficiency<sup>1</sup>

**Policy:** Chinese national policy

**L1/L2:** First/second language

**INTRODUCTION**

China has approximately 415 million English learners (Wei & Su, 2012; British Council, 2006; Hatch, 2021), making English as a foreign language (EFL) a substantial share of one of the biggest fields of education globally (McCulloch, 2018; OECD, 2016). The rapid expansion of English programs since the late 1970s led to an initial teacher shortage, with only 30% of junior teachers qualified (Hu, 2005). By 2000, 91% had the necessary qualifications in accordance with 'The Teacher's law of China, Chapter III: Qualifications and Employment' (MOE, 2001a). While China's Teacher's Law (MOE, 2009a) and Education Law (MOE, 2009b) outline requirements for teaching, which include the 'Teachers Qualification' for Chinese citizens and degrees for foreigners, there have been no explicit language proficiency mandates for domestic teachers or specific degree requirements for foreign teachers. As the English language market has grown (Zhang, 2017), the teachers in the two main contexts of

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<sup>1</sup> Using academic qualifications, professional training and/or qualifications, recognised language proficiency scales and participant-volunteered information.

state education and the after-school tuition centres of the private sector appear to have had significant leeway in terms of suitability criteria.

This study explores the recent situation through a cross-sectional, small representative population of teachers, with an exploratory, non-probability, purposive sample used to answer a questionnaire (Denscombe, 2017, pp.24 & 35). Thematic analysis was carried out manually by coding and identifying common themes from the data, implementing the principles of Glaser and Strauss's Grounded Theory methodology (1998). Complementary data collection from existing documents supported triangulation and theory building (Bowen, 2009, p.35).

### **Problem Statement**

As the official language of almost 60 countries and the global lingua franca (GlobEd, 2020) in myriad industries, from aviation, medicine, academia, and politics, it is apparent that 'English' is an advantageous tool. While discussions on the problematic term of 'English as an international language', with assumptions of linguistic commonality and choice enforced by Western colonialist expansion (Pennycook, 2017) continue, it is clear that various forms of 'English' have been embedded as 'international gatekeeper' in global cultures and knowledge exchange (Pennycook, 2017, p.13). The development of a global standard, similar to the widely accepted yet outdated and inaccurate concept of 'standard' English (Schneider, 2016, p. 339), raises questions about its appropriateness for fostering mutual understanding and, more specifically, for teaching purposes (Modiano, 1999, p. 23).

Alternatively, each variety of 'World Englishes' (Kachru, 1991, p. 179) could adhere solely to its own standards. Two possibilities are that each version will eventually transmogrify into new, distinct dialects (Schneider, 2016, p.340), or all will amalgamate into one generalised, mutually intelligible global language (Crystal, 2012, p.167). Whichever transpires, there is nonetheless an assumption that those teaching English will be proficient, but there are indications that this is frequently untrue (Hu, 2002, p.40; Lehmann & Leonard, 2019, p.156). The claims that domestic teachers have poor spoken language skills (Chen & Goh, 2011, pp.336-7) and orthodox teaching methods (Boyle, 2000; Cheng, 2019; Xu, 2021; Zhao et al., 2013), while foreign teachers have little to no formal training, or work illegally (Leonard,



2019; Quinn, 2019) have led to numerous policy developments, in some cases to eradicate unlawful employees and employers (Hua, 2020; Fan, 2019; Pan, 2019; The People's Government of Beijing, 2017) or to adjust the requirements for public school teachers (Cui & Zhu, 2014, pp1-4; Hu, 2004, p.20) by raising the threshold for academic qualifications, thus improving the quality of education for students (MOE, 2021a). The question of what constitutes 'standards' and what implications there are for teachers of English in China and beyond is explored in this study.

### **Aims and Objectives**

The research aimed to assess the proficiency of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) teachers in China, focusing on their teaching skills and language proficiency. This investigation sought to provide insights into the state of English teaching across generations in China, recognising that teachers influence the skills and teaching practices of future educators. The study also considered how China's evolving variety of English has global relevance as more Chinese individuals pursue international opportunities. The objectives were to expand the current body of knowledge on teacher proficiency, particularly regarding qualification requirements and pedagogical standards, and to explore the role of policymakers in ensuring fair and effective teacher recruitment. Teachers' experiences were gathered using international language proficiency standards (e.g., IELTS, TOEFL) to compare legal qualifications with personal perceptions of proficiency. The question of whether English teachers in China are adequately qualified, with appropriate subject-related degrees and language acquisition training is the key question in this research. This is explored by canvassing what qualifications existing teachers hold, asking if there are widespread concerns regarding insufficient language skills and underqualified teachers, what standards are used to evaluate these factors, and to what extent these standards are enforced. The goal is to understand what resources are being made available to English learners and to examine the broader implications of these provisions.

### **Relevance and Importance of the Research**

As China's global influence grows, its teaching practices, particularly in English, increasingly impact international education, business, and politics. As a direct result of the proficiency of

its teachers, of which there are an estimated 17.93 million Chinese teachers (Xinhua, 2021) and 400,000 foreign teachers (Quinn, 2019), China has been evaluating its EFL practices, deemed in need of improvement from within the country (Cheng & Wang, 2004, no pagination) to 'better prepare Chinese people to become global citizens' (Jin et al., 2017, p.7), an example illustrated by the increasing numbers of Chinese students studying abroad (Textor, 2024). This study seeks to explore the issue of teaching standards in China's EFL programs from the teachers' perspective.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There is extensive research on proficiency from the perspectives of national policy (Zhang, 2012), historical events, student perspectives (Cheng & Wang, 2004; Jin & Cortazzi, 1996a, b, 2006; Jin et al., 2017; Hé & Miller, 2011; Hu, 2002; Qi, 2016; Zhao, 2012), and the professional EFL/ESL market (Hé, 2017; Wang & Wei, 2016). Together, they illustrate how policy and proficiency have developed in tandem, though challenges remain, such as pedagogical methods, capitalist influence, and the competitive education system. In conducting a literature review, it was clear that less has been explored from the teacher's perspective.

Richards and Rodgers (1986, in Xinmin & Adamson, 2003, p.324) differentiate pedagogy as internal and personal, and methods as external and generalised. Zuzovsky (2009) states that teachers require specific skills or experience (in Yasin, 2021, p.39), and EFL teachers need development in three key areas: English proficiency, language knowledge, and teaching methodologies (Wu, 2001, p.193). The perception that teachers lack grounding in theoretical developments and language teaching (Lamie, 2006, p.69) persists. Hu (2010) highlights the importance of having teachers who are highly proficient in the target language and professionally trained, providing students with plenty of chances for genuine communication in the language, sufficient instructional time, teaching methods tailored to the needs of young learners, and ongoing, well-structured follow-up instruction in later grades (p.18) which at the time of writing were conditions largely missing in the Chinese context. He attributes students' poor language abilities to teachers' lack of proficiency (p.78) and varying pedagogical standards.

### **Historical context, EFL development, and teacher proficiency**

The question of teacher proficiency in China begins by setting two contextual elements: a framework of standards and teaching practice. First, the concept of 'standards' should be clarified. Timmermans and Epstein (2010) explain that 'standards and standardisation aim to render the world equivalent across cultures, time, and geography' (p.69). By generating or repeating agreed-upon rules over periods of time, standards are created and then legitimised by professional bodies, with uniformity as a baseline (p.71). While organisations such as IELTS and TOEFL set language standards for some parts of the world, Cambridge International Education (2019) highlights no definitive set of international standards in education. However, surveys like PISA (the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment), TIMSS (Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study) and PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) emphasise their importance (p.2). In teaching, 'defining competencies and developing standards' is essential to create continuity in English teaching across locations (Kuhlman & Knežević, 2013, p.2). While each country sets its own teacher training standards, when demand exceeds supply, policy often balances between qualifications and desired characteristics. In extreme cases, teachers may teach without prior training (Villegas-Reimers, 2003 in Barrera-Pedemonte, 2019, p.3). TESOL International Association attributes accepted standards as a mainframe for education: 'In the case of education, we need to know where we are going (the standard) in order to know how to get there (the curriculum) and when we have arrived at a benchmark (the assessment and evaluation). Standards thus serve as a point of reference and a way of ensuring consistency when needed, both in school and in life' (Kuhlman and Knežević, 2013, p.7).

When considering standards in relation to language, it is clear that Englishes have evolved across various geographical contexts, with the outdated term 'native English' not only being misrepresentative but increasingly becoming a minority form of usage worldwide (Rose et al., 2021). The result is no one universal 'standard' (McKay, 2012 in Kuhlman and Knežević, 2013, p.16), challenging the constrictive term 'English as an international language' or 'global language' (Rubdy, 2009). Inevitably, making decisions about which English to use is a

political issue. As we enter a new era where primacy appears to be shifting from West to East (Hagger, 2022; Kawakita, 2020; Layne, 2012), EFL teaching must also evolve (Brown, 2021; Li & Liu, 2024). What remains constant is the requirement for a 'standard' or 'standards' in teachers' proficiency (McKay, 2012 in Kuhlman & Knežević, 2013, p.16) to ensure English language learners receive the best possible educational instruction.

Some theories that form the foundations of EFL teacher proficiency and provide context for this research lead us to the second element to consider - teacher proficiency in China. Existing literature highlights how policy and proficiency have evolved alongside one another while underscoring the ongoing challenges each group faces in reaching a satisfactory outcome (Gil, 2016; Guo, 2012; Hu et al., 2024; Pan, 2015; Zhang & Shi, 2023). All discuss areas of friction, including pedagogical methods, capitalist influence, and the demanding, competitive nature of the education system. The available literature is critical of both foreign and domestic teacher shortcomings. For example, Li and Jin (2020) posit that Chinese teachers hold 'a weak grounding in (EFL) pedagogy, lacked professional competence for [the] English language' (p.1098), and argue that their main strengths stem from an experienced understanding of the requirements to pass exams, the primary focus for every Chinese student (Kirkpatrick & Zang, 2011, pp.36-37). Similarly, Jin and Cortazzi agree that foundational training in English as a second or foreign language training has not been effectively deployed, if at all, yet also suggest that a cultural misunderstanding of how Chinese students learn and absorb information renders the differently-trained foreign teachers ineffective, as despite utilising a more interactive approach, there is a lack of exam-passing skill involved (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a, p.6; 1996b, p.72; Jin & Cortazzi 2006, p.19). The result appears to be that each group possesses only half of the necessary skills—domestic teachers excel in literacy, while foreign teachers lead in communicative proficiency.

Looking at the historical context is vital to understanding the contemporary mindset and abilities of English teachers in China. From the Confucian origins of educational philosophy through the volatile political and social upheavals of the twentieth century, from internal civil wars, the savage incidents of World War II, and the Cultural Revolution (Hu, 2002; Hu, 2005; Xiong, 2012; Zhao, 2012), each negatively ramified the availability and quality of

English education and continues to influence education in China well into the twenty-first century (Yahaya et al., 2011). The existing research examines the consequences of these historical events, which have resulted in alleged inferior fluency among the current generation of English teachers (Ross, 1992 in Hu, 2002, p.57) through inadequate resources and fluctuating attitudes toward English, and the oft-debated validity of using foreign or L1 English teachers (Li and Jin, 2020, p.1099; Wang, 2011, pp.81-82; Wu, 2001, p.192). Cheng & Wang (2004), Hu (2002) and Zhao (2012) consider English language education provisions and how historical pedagogical conventions have persisted, hindering teaching progress (Lo, 2019). These circumstances continue to influence new generations of English teachers, who, despite years of study, often leave university with low proficiency levels (Hu, 2002, p. 16) and stagnating pedagogical methods. The current generation of English teachers in China was cast from a mould that was shaped by a century of invisible forces that influenced society (Lo, 2019) and has been divided into 'five broad historical periods' catalogued by Hu (2002, p.16) that influenced the availability and quality of education, leading to the recent dilemmas:

1. The Soviet Influence (1949-1956) – Following the founding of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, relations with the West deteriorated, and using English was seen as unpatriotic and so was replaced with Russian and its teaching methods, which were teacher-dominated, textbook-centred, grammar-translation modes. This set the foundations for language learning and teaching in China for the next half century (Hu, 2002, p.17).
2. Expansion of Public Education (1957-1965) – During the effort to accelerate development, an ideological divergence between neighbours known as the 'Sino-Soviet Split' occurred (Li, M., 2011, p.389; Li & Xia, p.3), and the importance of English re-emerged as diplomatic and trade relations were formed with other countries. However, a shortage of English speakers and teachers now existed. To quickly alleviate the problem, Russian teachers were re-trained and re-purposed, using politicised Chinese-produced teaching material (Liu, 2015, p.71), with an updated goal which focused on teaching and learning technical English 'as a means of access to scientific and technical information to support national development' (Liu, 2015, p.18). This partly resulted in a generation of future teachers rote-learning a

narrow scope of content-specific English taught by underprepared Russian language teachers (Bolton & Graddol, 2012, p.4).

3. 'The Decade of Chaos' (1966-1976) – English was once again expunged during this tumultuous period. All English language broadcasts were prohibited, imported English books were banned, English language teaching programs were removed from secondary curricula, and all universities and colleges were shut down. As a result, the formal education system came to a halt (Hu, 2002, p.19). This group is now of retirement age and are the grandparents, parents and former teachers of the current generations of English language educators.

4. Opening Up and Modernisation (1977-1985) – The Cultural Revolution ended in 1976 and saw the reinstatement of international cooperation. Education underwent a reorientation, with English returning to the national curriculum in 1978 (Hu, 2002, p19). The seeds of capitalism took root, and accessibility to English-speaking countries was re-established through academia, professional connections, and media with the advent of TV (Hu, 2002, p.20). With limited screenings of American films from the 1990s (CNN 2021; Papish, 2017), learning English took its place as one of the most important tools for national advancement, and due to the population, became the biggest English language learning initiative in the world (Wei & Su, 2012, p.11). 'In the 1980s, teachers had a weak grounding in pedagogy, lacked professional competence for English language, and knew very little about recent developments in foreign language education both at home and abroad' (Li & Jin, 2020, p.1098). Only within the past 40 years has English been a consistent part of the Chinese education landscape, but it is built on a seemingly fragile foundation (Bolton & Graddol, 2012, p.7).

5. Educational Reform (1986 onwards) - Several models of reform were introduced to strengthen the quality of English language education, supported by the gradual opening of the country, including redesigning teaching material to contain less political content and focus more on student-oriented learning, increased foreign teacher recruitment and an expansion and development of pedagogical knowledge and skills through the deployment of

Chinese teachers to Western universities, however 'outdated curriculums, rigid teaching methods, shortage of qualified teachers, and examination-oriented instruction' perpetuated low English proficiency (Hu, 2002, p.20).

Following what Peterson describes as 'the most significant educational initiative in human history' (1997, p.3), where the percentage of adults who were literate grew from about 20% in 1949 to over 95% by the end of the 20th century (Chen, 2022), China's education system in the 21st century has undergone major reforms to further modernise and improve provisions (Law, 2014). The 2001 Basic Education Curriculum Reform (Cui & Zhu, 2014) shifted to a more integrated curriculum, fostering diverse learning styles and improved evaluation methods. Teacher education was also revised to better equip educators, with subject knowledge regarded as the most essential component of teacher preparation and professional training programs (Zhang & Yang, 2017, cited in Ye et al., 2019). The 2021 Double Reduction Policy overhauled the private education landscape to ease students' academic burdens, and by 2022, over 10 million students graduated from college (MOE, 2021b), reflecting China's rise to become a 'leader of educational excellence' (Li & Li, 2019). (Reportedly, the UK's current HE enrollment is 35.8% (Bolton, 2025), while China's is 60.2% (MOE, 2024)). Other reforms included China's education modernisation plan towards 2035 (MOE, 2019), aiming to standardise curricula, textbooks, teacher qualifications, and expand vocational education, all to enhance education quality and accessibility.

Along with continuous and rapid improvement in education, the national context is shaped by long-standing cultural principles, with exams having deep historical roots in the region. They were first developed by the Chinese centuries ago - as early as the Han Dynasty (206 BC–220 AD) – and entry into the bureaucracy was determined by national examinations (Hill, 2010 in Kell & Kell, 2013). Based on this foundation, the education system in China administers high-stakes exams such as the Gaokao College Entrance Exam (Davey et al., 2007, p.385; Pires, 2019, pp.169-175), which filters students into different strata of higher education, vocational college or out of the system (Hu, 2002, pp.16-20). The consequences of low exam scores result in life-changing outcomes (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a, p.16; Davey et al., 2007, p.385; p.14; Hill, 2010, p.8), with the added onus of carrying the family honour

(Wang & Ross, 2010, pp.85-90; Zhao et al., 2015, p.5). This pressures current educators to focus on scores, and illustrates one element of the perpetuated inheritance of low aptitude in English (Zhang, 2012) through streamlining education to hit narrow goals. With this practice, education takes on a form of competition (Hanyi et al., 2021).

With such entrenched educational customs focused on the dogma of examination success (Zhang & Koshmanova, 2021), current teachers of English may have been influenced not only through their own inherited learning journey but also by the perpetuated exam-driven approach in teacher training, with effectiveness assessed based on students' exam results (Lo & Ye, 2017) as opposed to communicative ability, which prevails despite two decades of curriculum reforms (Lo, 2019).

From investigating the existing literature, it was discovered that the historical and political perspectives are well-documented, along with suggestions for improvements in curricula, and pedagogical ideals are substantive and diverse. Common methodologies employed are often qualitative in nature and include literature-based exploration, case studies and interviews. These all provide a clearly established and comprehensive body of knowledge regarding TESOL in China; however, a significant gap is found in the scarcity of and necessity for more data on and from the teachers.

### **Key Debates and Controversies**

One controversial element of the Chinese EFL market is that of foreign teachers recruited to work in the private sector, which has proliferated over the past thirty years. Typically, the preferred profile for foreign recruits problematically specifies that they are from one of seven 'native-English-speaking countries' (any of the four British nations, collectively known as the UK, Ireland, the USA, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa) (English First, Galea, 2021; 2021; Protulipac, 2020; Stanley, 2012; TEFL Society, 2022) and hold a degree and a TEFL (Li & Jin, 2020). Along with the now-unacceptable 'native' terminology, which forms a discriminatory binary on language (Jodaei, 2021; Wang & Fang, 2021), Lan (2022) and Liu (2021) further describe the highly racialised Chinese EFL job market, where white teachers are prioritised while non-white teachers experience discrimination, regardless of qualifications. This creates an imbalance in supply and demand, resulting in surplus



vacancies which are allegedly filled with people outside the stated requirements, such as people without degrees, relevant degrees, or experience (Jang, 2023), where English-speaking recruits with the preferred visage (Jun-shuan, 2020; Wang et al., 2020) but lacking in pedagogical methods are processed using false or augmented documentation (Pan, 2019), and presented as a citizen of one of the seven countries. Although there is limited academic literature on this issue, there is a wealth of firsthand accounts and non-academic articles supporting this commonly accepted norm. The key debate raised in racialised hiring of foreign teachers (Kubota, 2023) is that of competency or lack thereof. This, in part, supports the reputation of under-skilled or illegal foreign teachers of English in China (Stanley, 2012), further impacting learners.

The implications of domestic teachers operating at compulsory education level with inferior or limited oral English skills (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021, p.57; Cheng & Wang, 2004, p.6; Hu, 2005, p.12; Xing & Bolden, 2019, p.835; Zhang, 2012) and unskilled, unqualified or illegal foreign teachers (Blatchford, 1983, p.1202; Qu, 2019, p.2; Cortazzi, & Jin, 1996a, p.34) working in both the public and private sector in a bid to meet consumer demand, and both groups deploying the use of inadequate teaching material (Xiong, 2012, p.500), all have a detrimental impact on learners. In the literature, criticisms have been levelled at teachers around four main areas:

1. limited or aperiodic availability of English language education due to political changes (Hu, 2002 - 2005),
2. ineffective EFL-specific pedagogy (Hu, 2002; Zhao, 2012),
3. unsuitable curricula/material (Xiong, 2012, p.501), and
4. inadequate teacher training/requirements (Cheng & Wang, 2004).

From a pedagogical perspective, there have been frequent developments from traditional teacher-centred 'chalk-and-talk' (Cheng, 1988, p.90) to more immersive learning environments and techniques (Cheng, 2012, p.380; Hammerly, 1987, p.395). As the evolution of pedagogy in China moved aspirationally to 'advance national development with access to international scientific and technical information' (Hu, 2002, p.17), English became

'not simply a tool but a defining measure of life's potential' (Gil & Adamson, 2011, p.23), more focus was put on 'authentic' English language learning including the import of foreign teachers for language instruction. Attracted by the cheap cost of living, less stringent scrutinisation of documents (Philippine Consulate, 2022), and abundance of well-paid jobs requiring little-to-no experience, the profusion of under-qualified or unskilled foreign teachers widely reported to be working in the shadows of the law (Cao & Hou, 2013; Connor, 2020; Samson, 2019) added to the dearth of proficient teachers. Along with policy reforms, the Ministry of Education (MOE) has frequently addressed the problem of foreign teachers, including the 2021 'Double Reduction Policy' (Government of the People's Republic of China, 2021), which dismantled the EFL market by effectively shutting down extracurricular schools and tightening the guidance on teaching materials and learning provisions, including pedagogical guidelines.

From the students' perspective, English is introduced officially in Year 3 (8-9 years old) (Silver, Hu, & Lino, 2002, p.11). However, some kindergartens and training centres have provided classes from the age of around five (p.10). Classes in China are usually around 40 minutes and often have more than 50 students (Bank & Yeulet, 2014, p.65; Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a, p.42.), enforcing teacher-centred learning. For students to participate individually in class is almost impossible due to both time and audio constraints, meaning 'didactic, instructor-centred methods' (Yang, Zheng, & Li, 2006, p.1217) are a product of circumstance and continue despite reforms (Lo, 2019).

This reflects the enduring socio-historical influences, where teaching is firmly rooted in its main objective of preparing students for a successful future through academic success (Lo, 2019). It has been frequently suggested that in the Confucian model of learning (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996a, p.31; Deng, 2011, p.564), the custom is for learners to absorb information for deep understanding, while Western pedagogy develops agency in individuals through critical thinking and self-expression (He, 2021, p.63). In Chinese tradition, the deeply ingrained custom of the development of inner knowledge being developed through meditative absorption is illustrated by the mode of learning common in Chinese classrooms. The model for English learning, despite pedagogical developments (Lo, 2019; Murray et al.,

2023), perpetuates the stereotype of 'passive learning' (Chen & Wen, 2021) by limiting opportunities to interact authentically, and develop communicative English proficiency (Chen, 2014; Hu, 2003, p.295; Jin & Cortazzi, 2011, p.129; Jin et al., 2017, p.16; Zheng, 2012, p.7).

This may help explain the disunion between the rigorous learning environment and reported results following compulsory education (Chen, 2014). For example, Chinese students studying in the U.S. reported difficulty using English, having learned English in China through teachers with the same linguistic and cultural background (Jiang, Yang & Zhou, 2017, p.64), with few opportunities for diverse English language interactions (Gil, 2008, p.3; Hu, 2005, p.18). The resulting difference between a classroom setting and an authentic environment was so great that studying and communicating in English was challenging (corroborated by Nalbantova, 2023). He & Miller (2011) suggest that 'The ETCs' (English Teachers from China) not-so-competent communicative capability is one of the reasons for them to avoid the communicative approach and focus on examination-related skill development' (p.439). This is validated by Wei & Su (2012), who describe exam-focused learning as rendering learners unable to communicate in English. This is further corroborated by the claim that 'only 21% of English learners in China reported possession of a communicative competence in English that allowed them to sustain conversations beyond initial greetings' (Wei & Su cited in Liu, Lin, & Wiley, 2016, p.139). Contentiously, Tang (2002) reports that despite some university students advocating for the exclusive use of English in the classroom, some teachers prefer to utilise Chinese to facilitate learning (p.40). Conversely, He & Miller (2011) reported that students stated a preference for domestic teachers due to a mutual understanding of the requirements for passing exams, a familiarity with learning methods and the ability to discuss technical matters in their L1 language (p.437).

The combination of implied ineffective domestic pedagogical methods and inexperienced foreign teachers creates an area of interest that may be difficult to explore due to teachers disputing or being unaware of perceived weaknesses in their practices and the reluctance to discuss potentially incriminating issues. Overall, the existing literature supports the notion

of proficiency issues among both domestic and foreign teachers at compulsory education level, but with limited accounts from the teachers themselves.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Theoretical framework**

Biases in self-assessment of language proficiency are subjective and influenced by cultural norms, individual perceptions of language ability, confidence, exposure to the language, social contexts, and the standards or expectations set by educational systems or society, while teaching proficiency is assessed through qualifications and experience. The study adopts a non-positivist epistemological stance and a mixed methods approach to understand individual perceptions (Flick, 2018). Festinger's Social comparison theory (1954) suggests that individuals have an innate drive to compare themselves to others to assess their own opinions and abilities. Darvin & Norton (2021) discuss how language learners' view of effective teaching may differ from that of teachers, highlighting dissonance in how people assess each other. The research considers the subjective nature of the assessment of others by incorporating both qualitative methods and a non-experimental correlational approach to investigate relationships between qualifications and perceived ability (Galton, 1889; Jopling, 2019). By employing closed- and open-ended questionnaires, which include both self-reflection and peer assessment, the study aims to reduce bias and gain deeper insights. Critical analysis and thematic exploration reveal patterns in the proficiency of English teachers in China, enhanced through method triangulation.

### **Methods and Sources**

**Units of Analysis:** The study analysed EFL teachers, their language proficiency, and teaching proficiency.

**Sampling:** A voluntary, non-probability sample of both domestic and foreign EFL teachers in China was recruited via social media platforms (WeChat, LinkedIn, Facebook). Participants were required to have teaching experience in China, ensuring a range of perspectives from different educational contexts. Results were not collated according to nationality in order to obtain a general overview. While the method facilitated broad geographic coverage, it did not allow for equal representation from both teacher groups or follow-up interviews.

**Data Collection:** Data was gathered via a questionnaire distributed online. The questionnaire included various question types (e.g., dichotomous, multiple choice, open-ended) to explore qualifications, language proficiency, and teaching experiences. The limitations included an imbalance in demographics and an inability to conduct follow-up interviews, partly due to pandemic restrictions.

**Study Sites:** Teachers from government schools, private schools (including international), and other settings (e.g., training centres, private tutoring) participated, representing a range of teaching environments in China.

### **Data Analysis**

Data were collected through the questionnaire and analysed using thematic analysis and correlational analysis. Responses were categorised by themes, and language proficiency was assessed. Existing literature was cross-referenced for triangulation. The data analysis followed a structured approach, including coding responses, categorising themes, and comparing results with previous research. All participants met the study's inclusion criteria, and the findings were presented using a constant comparative method for analysis.

This study was carried out in accordance with the recommendations of the University of Dundee's (2022) Policy for Non-Clinical Research Involving Human Participants with full ethics approval. Informed consent was distributed to each participant prior to completing the questionnaire.

## **FINDINGS**

### **Results**

The questionnaire results provide insights into the demographics, English proficiency and teaching qualifications of English teachers in China, as well as their opinions on English education in the country. Questions 1-3 were open-ended, while Questions 4 -13 were closed questions. Questions 14 -16 were analysed using thematic analysis, coding the open-ended questions using a colour key to create categories of common themes that were revealed. Results for open-ended questions and thematically analysed questions were

originally reported using histograms, while dichotomous closed question are reported using doughnut charts, some of which are reproduced here. There were 70 voluntary respondents, 20 of whom were Chinese and the remainder from 11 countries (Figure 1).

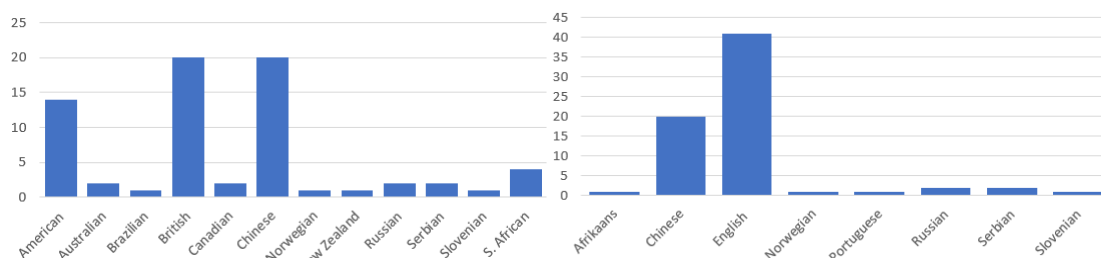


Figure 1: Nationality and L1 of respondents

## Section 1 - Personal Information

Contextual questions 1-4 on nationality, L1 and place of work were posed to establish an overview of respondents. The majority worked in training centres (27.1%) and kindergartens (15.7%), with others teaching at state and international schools. Daily language use revealed that 42.8% of the 70 respondents do not use English regularly, suggesting that English use is not consistent for all teachers. 32.8% of respondents had 2-5 years of experience, and 27.1% had 6-10 years.

## Section 2 - English Proficiency

Questions 5-10 were self-assessments on English proficiency and revealed that many respondents had taken English proficiency exams. Of the 31 L2 English-speaking teachers, 20 claimed to have taken a test, with scores ranging from 6-9 on the IELTS scale, while others self-rated higher scores. Among L1 English speakers, most had not taken the test but self-reported a score of 10. Exposure to English in both work and social settings was reported, though only 28.5% of respondents were Chinese, potentially skewing the results towards foreign teachers. A majority claimed to engage with English media in their free time, indicating regular exposure to the language, while 42.8% stated (Figure 3) that they do not use English as a daily language in question 1. iii, while more than 50 respondents stated in questions 4 and 5 that they have regular contact with first-language or fluent English

speakers in both work and social settings where they only communicate in English. This does not fully describe the English proficiency levels of the Chinese teachers, which was of interest in this research, however the fact that 13 responded that they have no contact with fluent English speakers in work, 10 responded that they have no contact with fluent English speakers outside of work and three responded that they do not engage with English language media shows that there are active teachers with limited exposure to the subject they are teaching. Concerns of language proficiency among teachers were apparent: 'Some of the Chinese staff in the English department I work for are definitely underqualified and lack the skills to properly teach. Their own English skills are lacking, so it makes it difficult for them to teach it' (Respondent 59); 'There are a lot of unqualified teachers in China from non-English speaking countries. Their English level is barely good enough to teach preschool kids' (Respondent 58).

### Section 3 - Teaching Proficiency

Questions 7 – 11 investigated teaching proficiency from a number of perspectives, such as formal qualifications, relevant qualifications, ongoing professional training, and TESOL-specific training. 5 (11.4%) respondents stated they held a degree below the requirement of China (minimum of a Bachelor's degree) (Figure 2), 51 (72.8%) stated that their degree was not related to teaching English, however 58 (82.8%) stated they had TESOL-specific training in the form of TEFL or similar certification, and 39 (55.7%) stated that they do not receive or participate in ongoing professional training. It is not possible to affirm if these claims are true or false and if any respondents are prevaricating due to concerns about working under false documentation. In terms of qualifications, 51.4% claimed to have a bachelor's degree, and 38.5% held a postgraduate degree. However, 48.5% reported having degrees unrelated to teaching English, which shows that 72.8% of degrees held are unrelated to TESOL, with common fields being finance, business, and urban planning. 48.5% claim to hold a TEFL qualification, the minimum requirement for teaching English in China, and 55.7% indicated they did not participate in ongoing professional development.

*Q8. Do you have a degree? If so, what level?*

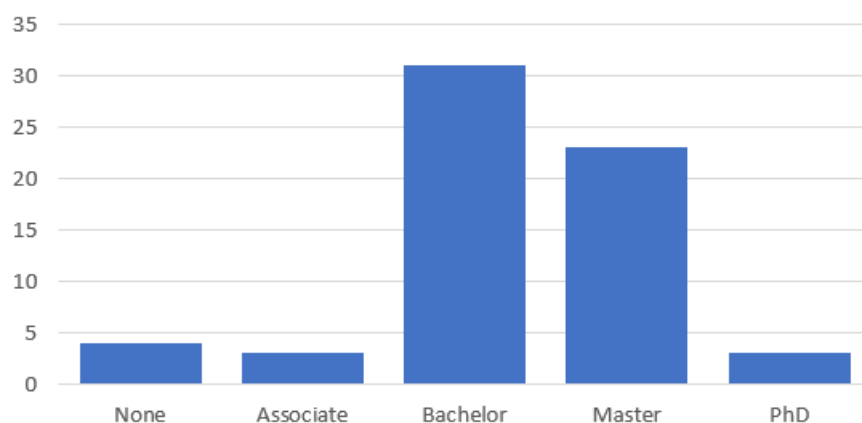


Figure 2: Response to question 8 – academic qualifications

*Q9. i) Is your degree related to teaching English as a second or foreign language?*

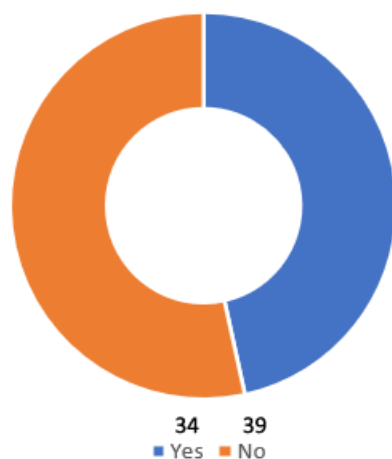


Figure 1: Response to question 9 i) – degree.

#### Section 4 - Opinions on English Teaching in China

The last three questions were open-ended and were designed to allow the respondents to share personal experiences and opinions that may support or elaborate on the more limited answers provided in the first two sections of the questionnaire. The answers were coded using thematic analysis, which identified keywords and themes from the survey answers. The responses highlighted key issues in the English teaching profession in China. They were much more revealing and expressed a strong pattern of opinion which claims that illegal, unqualified teachers are common, as are low language and pedagogical proficiency. Many respondents identified unqualified teachers (39 instances) and illegal documentation (40



instances) as significant problems (Figure 4). While subjective, low English proficiency, particularly oral skills, was a recurring concern, with 62.8% of respondents believing English proficiency in China is low (Figure 5). Suggestions for improvement in TEFL included better curricula (17 mentions), more opportunities to practice English (21 mentions), policy changes (20 mentions), and a greater focus on qualified teachers and improved teaching methods (22 mentions) (Figure 6).

*Q16. What is your experience of English teachers in China with regard to their qualifications or expertise?*

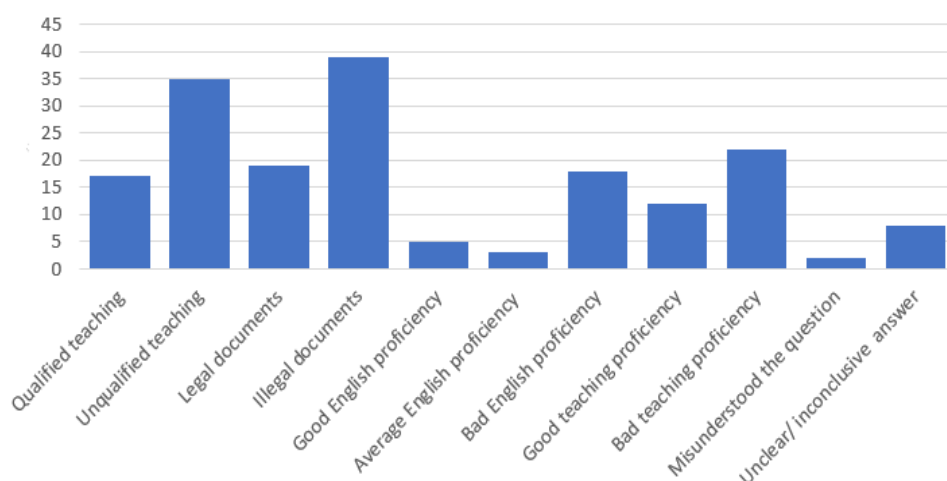
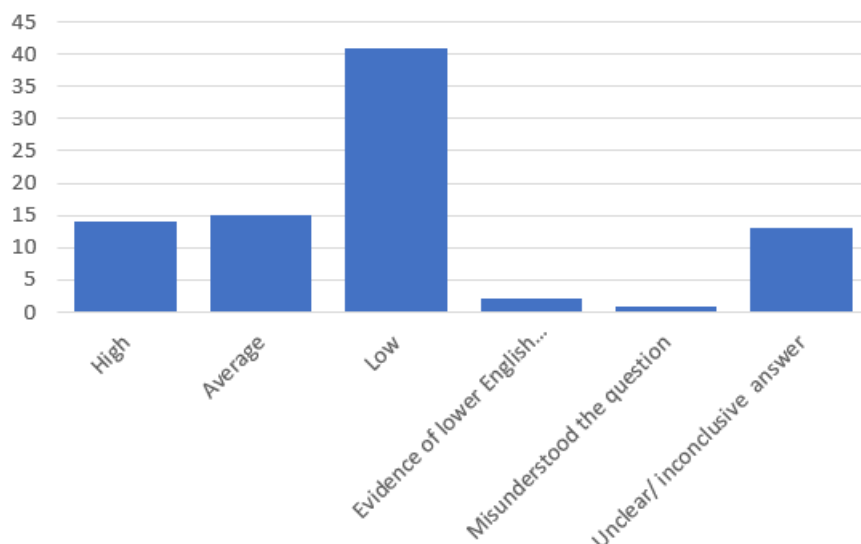


Figure 4: personal experience of English teachers in China

The results suggest that there *is* an issue regarding proficiency among English teachers in China and that it appears to be an open secret as opposed to being explicitly acknowledged in an official capacity. Themes that frequently appeared, such as 'My experience of "teachers" in China is that they aren't teachers. They (foreign teachers)... wouldn't get hired in a school in Aus/UK because they aren't qualified' (Respondent 60); 'They generally lacked any kind of teaching experience, and in many cases didn't even have basic teaching qualifications (e.g., TEFL/TESOL)' (Respondent 45); 'I have worked with many unqualified teachers who have no relevant teaching degrees or teaching experience' (Respondent 46); 'I have known teachers who did not have qualifications, only a bachelor's degree in an unrelated area' (respondent 63); 'I feel that there are many teachers in China who are under qualified as their only qualification is that they are L1 English... At my last teaching job in

China, an unqualified South African was hired over a highly qualified Chinese citizen whose English skills were comparable' (Respondent 62).

*Q17. What is your opinion of spoken English proficiency in China and why?*



*Figure 2: personal experience of English proficiency in China.*

In terms of opinions on spoken proficiency in China, Respondent 63 stated that standards are 'generally at a lower level than it should be considering that all students study English from grade three. Speaking is not commonly taught or assessed as far as I am aware. This may be the main reason'; 'There were and are loads of teachers who wasn't and isn't able to use the language very fluently themselves. Like, failed in the very basic level of English language commanding' (Respondent 48).

*Q18. What would you suggest to improve English language education in China?*

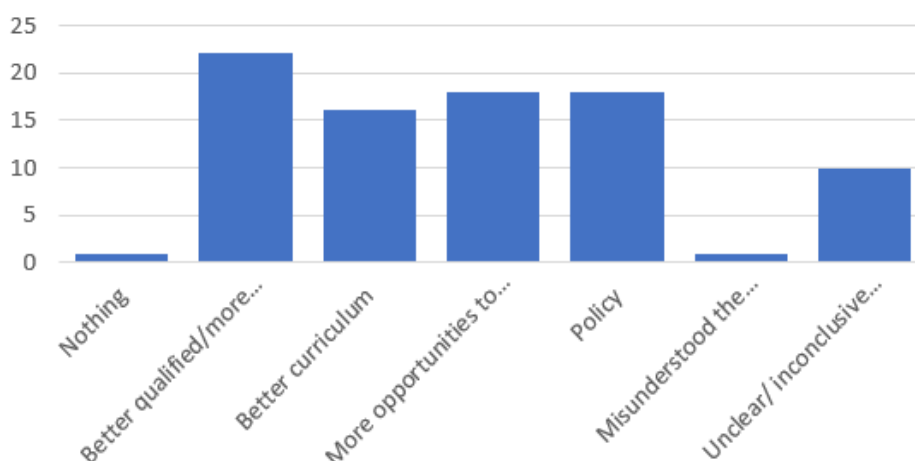


Figure 6: TEFL improvement suggestions

Evidence of continued use of dated curricula and grammar-translation methods, and insufficient recruitment practices were provided: 'Some teachers in China let students translate the passage sentence by sentence and mark Chinese on their book then let students recite them' (Respondent 54); 'I would that they change old syllabus especial in the public schools and...set new university entry exams' (Respondent 53); 'There are few opportunities for Chinese students to practice spoken English, and most are not interested' (Respondent 52); 'Stricter rules on hiring foreign teachers. They should have an education-based degree and a TEFL certificate as a minimum' (Respondent 46).

## Discussion

The results, while sometimes subjective, reveal personal accounts of significant gaps in qualifications, proficiency, and pedagogical skills among English teachers in China, along with concerns about employment practices. Respondents expressed a strong desire for systemic changes to enhance both language and teaching proficiency to better serve learners.

Overall, the study supports the hypotheses derived within the literature review that there are issues with the qualifications and proficiency of both foreign and Chinese English teachers in China (Lamie, 2006, p.69; Wu, 2001, p.193). However, this is underrepresented in current available literature, particularly around domestic teachers' communicative proficiency and suitable foreign teacher recruitment. Respondents included individuals from several countries not listed as 'native' as specified in recruitment literature in China, which

may indicate possible visa irregularities. This perpetuates the issues around 'native-speakerism' and illustrates the practical issues through persisting with these terms in employing under-qualified foreign teachers or employing non-L1 teachers contra to published visa requirements: 'Some teachers have worked using incorrect visas, like student visa or tourist visa' (Respondent 56). Unexplored in existing literature, there is clearly an issue with foreign teacher recruitment practices and terminology that needs updating to better reflect both contemporary opinions on L1/L2 speakers and how this relates to TEFL proficiency and ensures Chinese learners of English have high-quality teachers.

English proficiency was a main area of concern for both domestic and foreign teachers, who commented on low language proficiency in both groups. Subjective comments on current teachers with limited exposure to the subject they are teaching and contradictory self-assessments of high proficiency warrant further exploration. It is likely that the majority of domestic teachers have not had the opportunity to study, work or live in English-speaking countries, and so have more limited frames of reference when assessing their language skills. In agreement with the discussions in the literature review, the results show that inconsistencies in proficiency exist (Hu, 2010; Jang, 2023; Pan, 2019). Domestic teachers are closely scrutinised in terms of qualifications according to an ever-evolving policy that demands increasingly well-qualified teachers and benefits from perspectives such as shared L1, experience of learning English, and knowledge of the education system. However, in many instances, there is evidence of insufficient English. The responsibility lies in producing teachers who are fit for purpose, to cultivate each new generation of English speakers, who automatically become part of the global community of people using a shared language. The machinations in place from a policy standpoint appear to enable proficiency issues to persist, from the narrow parameters for foreign teacher requirements that exclude the majority of potential candidates through the persistent culture of 'native-speaker' preferences to the traditional pedagogy that continues to be practised in the exam-driven compulsory education system that limits the opportunities for both teachers and learners to develop meaningful English communicative skills. These can be addressed through policy changes, which have been frequently revised and implemented in the intervening time

between carrying out this research and through a shift in public discourse around L1/L2 narratives (Brown, 2021; Li & Liu, 2024).

In assessing the limitations of this study, the added complexity of teachers potentially providing damaging accounts of themselves or colleagues or the culture of reverence around teachers in China, making criticism discommodious, may have led to some answers being distorted or inaccurate. This is also true of the results pertaining to qualifications. False information may have been provided (one respondent admitted to 'doing a TEFL course online', and four admitted to having no degree) as most teachers claim to be fully qualified, yet also maintain that illegal documentation, unqualified and inexperienced teachers are commonplace. The matters of legality, which are also underrepresented in the literature (Stanley, 2012), are a matter for policymakers to implement, such as the 2021 Double Reduction policy, which introduced stringent rules for tuition centres, English language teaching and curricula.

### **Implications and contributions to knowledge**

This study, which set out to investigate the perceived language and teaching proficiency of English language teachers in China and its implications for learners, several issues have come to light that deserve further attention, such as the disharmony between pedagogical goals and contextual realities. For example, the majority of Chinese teachers do not live in an environment that accommodates regular exposure to and practice of the English language, while foreign teachers are limited by the ingrained 'native speaker' narrative. By questioning the teachers, it is clear that widespread dilemmas directly affect each new generation of learners and, consequently, each new generation of teachers, perpetuating a cycle of inadequate standards. The implications will add another perspective to existing research on proficiency in TESOL and could better inform policymakers within and beyond China on the requirements for teachers of English.

### **CONCLUSION**

The findings revealed that there is an existing and perpetuated issue with both domestic and foreign teachers of English in China. To improve student learning experiences, there is a need to improve oral English skills among domestic teachers, and for foreign teachers to be

better qualified and trained, which can be achieved by actively changing the narrative around native-speakerism in public discourse, thus opening more opportunities for high-quality, non L1 English teachers. Through exploring the issue from the perspectives of the teachers, this study has highlighted the significant challenges related to the language and teaching proficiency of both domestic and foreign English teachers in China, emphasising the impact they have on students' language development. The findings underscore a critical gap between teachers' qualifications and the realities of English education, as well as the systemic barriers such as the exam-oriented approach and narrow recruitment parameters. These factors contribute to a cycle of inadequate standards that affect both learners and teachers. The study opens important avenues for further research, and provides valuable insights for policymakers, offering a clearer understanding of the challenges within China's English education system and suggesting areas for improvement to better support both educators and students.

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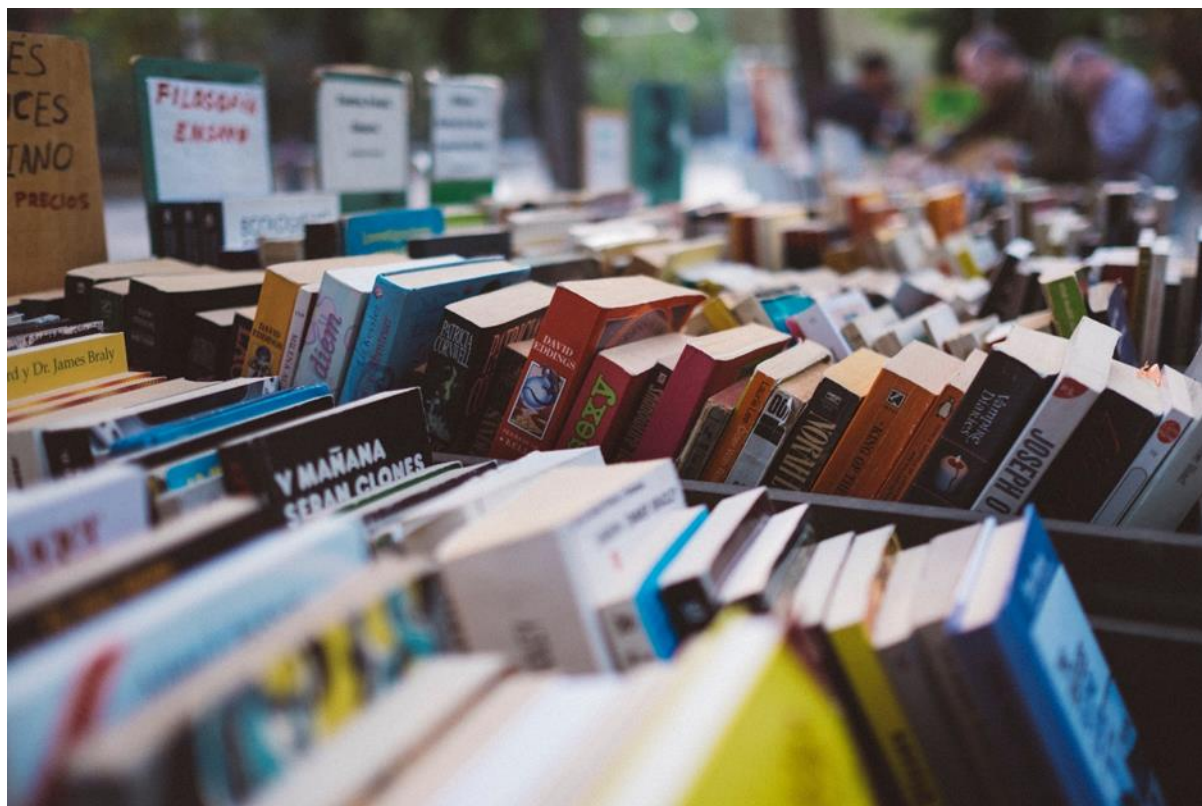
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## Reviews



## Article review of ‘What's in a name? Why ‘SLA’ is no longer fit for purpose and the emerging, more equitable alternatives’

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Article review of: Anderson, J. 2022. What's in a name? Why ‘SLA’ is no longer fit for purpose and the emerging, more equitable alternatives. *Language Teaching*. [Online]. 55(4), pp.427-433.

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In an award-winning paper published in the journal *Language Teaching*, Anderson (2022) suggested a name change for the discipline *Second Language Acquisition* (SLA), proposing *Additional Language Learning* and *Additional Language Development* as possible alternatives. He described the term SLA as not being sufficiently ‘equitable’ or ‘inclusive’ (Anderson, 2022, p.427) and went so far as to call it ‘a relic of prejudice’ (p.431). While he provided little support for these somewhat hyperbolic claims, he did reiterate some common criticisms that have previously been levelled against the words *second* and *acquisition* as used in the term SLA. However, while having some merit, these arguments are not compelling enough to justify a prescriptivist intervention to alter a widely used and commonly accepted term. The article is written for academics who are familiar with controversies and developments in the field of SLA.

Anderson’s objection to the word *second* is rooted in criticism that dates back decades and relates to the supposed exclusion of multi-lingual contexts (Ellis, 1994; Block, 2003). Anderson argued that

*second* cannot ‘incorporate a third, fourth or fifth language’ (p.430). However, there is considerable precedent in English for *second* being used to describe groupings of items. For example, if you purchase something at a second-hand shop, it does not rule out that it has had more than one previous owner; meanwhile, an orchestra has an entire section of second violinists; there are even precedents from within the field itself—L2 is commonly understood to mean any language that is learned after the languages acquired as an infant, and *English as a Second Language* is not renamed *English as a Third* (or *Fourth* or *Fifth*) *Language* depending on how many languages the learner has previously mastered. Given how common this usage of *second* is, it is unlikely that anybody would seriously presume that SLA research excludes third or fourth language acquisition.

Anderson’s issue with the word *acquisition* essentially boils down to objections over its association with the works of certain pioneers in the field of SLA, like Krashen (1976), who emphasized the use of the term to draw a distinction between the process of implicitly gaining linguistic knowledge and an explicit process, labelled *learning*. These researchers argued that learning was less useful than acquisition—a view that Anderson correctly points out has been challenged; however, as argued previously (Taylor, 2023), it has certainly not been debunked. If it had been, arguments against the term acquisition would be about as pedantic as complaints about using the term ‘sunrise’ in a post-Copernican world.

However, since research into the differences between learning and acquisition, as they relate to explicit and implicit knowledge, is still ongoing, Anderson’s claims as to the inappropriateness of the term *acquisition* merit a closer look. First, he suggested that *learning* could encapsulate different processes, including ‘attrition’ (language loss), which acquisition cannot (Anderson, 2022, p.430). However, if *learning* can encapsulate attrition, it is certainly not the way the word is commonly understood. In fact, the dictionary definition of the word *learning* is: ‘The *acquisition* [emphasis

mine] of knowledge or skills through study, experience, or being taught' (Oxford University Press, no date). Secondly, Anderson argued that *acquisition* implies purely cognitive processes (Anderson, 2022, p.430); however, this is neither supported by common usage—take the socio-cultural process of acquiring a nick-name, for example—nor is it supported by its use in SLA, where acquisition can—in an immersion environment, for example—be the direct result of social interactions. Thirdly, Anderson cited Cameron and Larsen-Freeman (2007) to suggest that acquisition implies completion (mastery) as the norm. However, this is also not how the term is commonly used. Whether one is acquiring wealth, Instagram followers, or information, everybody understands these are ongoing processes.

Anderson further undermined his own call for reform by providing evidence of common usage to support his terms of choice. He argued that one of his proposed terms (additional language learning), was preferable to his others (additional language teaching and additional language development) because it was more attested on Google n-gram by a significant margin. However, if current popularity bestows legitimacy, which arguably it does, it should be noted that *second language acquisition* is used 88 times more often than *additional language learning* (Google Books Ngram Viewer, no date), something he failed to mention. Whether or not one believes that language is a skill or knowledge, *acquisition* is still the more suitable term. A search on Google n-gram reveals that *skill acquisition* is almost four times as common as *skill learning*, while *acquire knowledge* is 30 times more commonly used than *learn knowledge* and three times more common than *develop knowledge* (Google Books Ngram Viewer, no date).

However, the debate over which term would be preferable is purely academic unless proposed changes could be universally adopted. It has been noted in some of these calls for change that a shift in such a well-entrenched term would be hard to achieve (e.g. Block, 2003). Furthermore, even if this

change were feasible, would it be desirable? Far from being more inclusive, as intended, replacing widely understood terms with new jargon could have the opposite effect if only an elite minority is able to keep up with trends. This could lead to an inner circle that consciously or unconsciously judges those who are too busy—or lack the proficiency in English—to keep up with the latest lexical proclamations.

Changing the term SLA is unnecessary. The word *acquisition* is semantically broad enough to either be synonymous or distinct from *learning*, meaning that it will continue being fit for purpose regardless of what future empirical evidence reveals. Meanwhile, researchers who really want to emphasize the fact that more than one language could constitute the first or second languages implied by SLA could easily add a parenthetical <s>, as in *Second Language(s) Acquisition*. That way the acronym with which we are all familiar could remain the same, leading to less confusion, and allowing hundreds of published works to not suddenly appear obsolete.

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