

# ***ESL Instructional Practices and Teacher Preparation: A Mixed Methods Study at a Chinese International High School***

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**Abstract:** This mixed methods study investigates ESL instructional practices at Shenzhen Experimental High School, a Chinese international secondary institution. The findings will provide data-driven insights into optimal teaching methods for Chinese adolescent ELLs. This holds significant implications for enhancing teacher preparation and professional development programs in international schools striving to meet the needs of diverse linguistic learners at Shenzhen Experimental to identify areas for improved professional development tailored to this context. The goal is informing data-driven reforms to enhance outcomes for the school's adolescent English language learners (ELLs). This research also provides an important foundation and model for future inquiries illuminating the multidimensional competencies that enable ESL teachers to create inclusive, linguistically responsive learning environments.

**Keywords:** ESL pedagogy, teacher preparation, professional development, Chinese ELLs, urban education

## **1. Introduction**

With rising linguistic diversity, providing appropriate language support is essential but research on effective ESL teaching approaches in Chinese high schools remains limited [1]. English as a second language (ESL) learning are integral in China's rapidly expanding international school sector [2]. These multicultural environments necessitate strong language development and linguistic adaptation among Chinese adolescents studying within an English-speaking environment. With linguistic diversity rising across urban centers, schools must provide appropriate language support while upholding rigorous academic standards. This challenge becomes pronounced at Shenzhen Experimental School, an international Chinese secondary institution where English Language Learners (ELLs) take content classes in English alongside native speakers. Teachers must adapt their instructional strategies to ensure equitable achievement for the school's large ELL population. However, research elucidating effective pedagogical approaches for ESL teachers in urban environments remains limited [1], especially within the Chinese secondary school context.

The significance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the complex issues related to urban ESL education. More broadly, this study offers an important model for qualitative and quantitative inquiry illuminating the multidimensional competencies that enable ESL teachers to

create inclusive, linguistically responsive learning environments. The findings will inform efforts to improve educational equity and outcomes for the growing population of urban secondary ELLs in China's rapidly internationalizing school system.

## 2. Literature Review

English language learners (ELLs) face unique challenges succeeding in mainstream urban high school classrooms [3]. Urban high schools present unique challenges for ELLs, including large classes, limited resources, and insufficient ESL training [4]. ELLs in these settings must overcome language barriers while meeting rigorous demands. Structured immersion helps develop English skills needed for content learning [5]. Explicit vocabulary and grammar instruction also aids comprehension [6]. However, this narrow linguistic focus overlooks ELLs' diverse backgrounds, which research shows necessitates culturally responsive teaching practices [7]. While studies identify effective ESL components, limited research examines optimal approaches for adolescent ELLs in mainstream urban high school classrooms, especially in Chinese contexts [8].

While research on Chinese international high schools remains limited, some studies offer insights on ESL teacher preparation in broader Chinese school settings. For example, Guo found professional development was key to improving teachers' implementation of communicative language teaching approaches. Moloney and Xu revealed teachers struggled to adopt new pedagogical beliefs without sufficient self-reflection and cultural awareness [9,10]. Wang, Bruce and Hughes advocated applying sociocultural learning theories to scaffold academic literacy through collaborative activities [11]. However, these studies focused on general contexts rather than international high schools specifically. Further research is warranted investigating best practices tailored to Chinese adolescent ELLs in international secondary school environments.

While quantitative measures evaluate teacher capacities and give overall assessment of teacher background portfolios, qualitative inquiry is needed to elucidate the nuanced struggles ELLs face and how competencies manifest in daily practices [12]. This study aims to address this research void by investigating practices among ESL teachers at Shenzhen Experimental School. It will elucidate relationships between teacher capacities and their instructional approaches with ELLs. The findings will strengthen teacher preparation and professional development to improve outcomes for this growing demographic.

## 3. Methods

This study employs a mixed methods approach combining surveys, interviews, and observations to develop a more robust analysis of the practices among ESL teachers. Mixed methods is appropriate for this research because the complex research questions require collecting multiple forms of data from both the teachers and student level angles [13]. The survey collected data from the school's 43 ESL teachers about qualifications, experiences, and self-efficacy. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for key survey variables including: TEFL certification, native English speaking status, years teaching English, and extended study abroad. Classroom observations of 10 teachers supplemented interviews to provide direct insights into pedagogical approaches employed. Observations help verify alignment between reported and actual practices. This multi-faceted design provides a comprehensive needs assessment to inform context-specific professional development. Additionally, ten teachers (4 foreign and 6 Chinese) participated in semi-structured qualitative interviews to gain further insight into their experiences and practices teaching English learners. The interview also reveals students perspectives towards teachers' instructional approaches. This answers questions about what teaching strategies are used and how/why teachers employ certain practices

based on students perceptions and beliefs. The following are questions asked to both the students and the teachers' end.

Table 1: Asked to the teachers

How does your developmental knowledge, professional orientations, and language capacities influence daily instructional strategies with your students?
What are the unique challenges that you have or had or have been facing in your day-to-day teaching practices?
Have you participated in teacher preparation program and what you were seeking from this practice?
How does teacher preparation and professional development programs support you with meeting the needs of ESL students?

Table 2: Asked to the students

What challenges have you noticed your ESL teachers facing in teaching learners in your school?
What more do you think your teachers need to know or understand to be more effective teachers?
What kinds of activities or assignments does your teacher use to help you practice and use English? How engaging or helpful are they?
How does your teacher check for understanding during lessons? Do they use any particular strategies to include ESL students?
How does your ESL teacher use your native language to support English learning if at all? How effective is this for you?

#### 4. Results Analysis

The quantitative results revealed critical gaps in ESL teacher preparation at Shenzhen Experimental High School. Surveys revealed just 34% of ESL teachers held TESL or TEFL certification, despite literature emphasizing such training's importance for effective instruction [12]. Additionally, three of five had over 5 years of experience teaching English in Chinese classrooms. In terms of Chinese ESL teachers' overseas experiences, 95% had studied abroad in English-speaking countries for varying lengths of time, most commonly in the US, UK and Australia. However, only 15% considered themselves fully fluent and confident in teaching adolescent ELLs across proficiency levels. Students corroborated these efficacy gaps, stating teachers lacked strategies for differentiating between beginner and advanced students. As one interviewee shared: "My teacher only explains words once. If you don't understand, she moves on fast and you get more confused." This aligns with studies showing urban ESL teachers often struggle meeting students' disparate needs [14]. This limited efficacy hints at deficiencies in certification programs to ready teachers for mixed proficiency urban classrooms. Additionally, just three non-native teachers held TEFL credentials, indicating major gaps for locals teaching ESL [15]. With one-third of students being ELLs, Shenzhen Experimental needs significantly more qualified native and non-native ESL staff.

Students also desired more cultural awareness and SLA knowledge from teachers. Interviews illuminated how these teacher training gaps disadvantage ELLs. Students described teachers struggling to scaffold content and provide individualized support, consistent with research on urban ESL challenges [16]. A student explained: "I wish teachers understood more about how we acquire English over time and our different cultural learning styles." Reviews indicate cultural responsiveness and second language development knowledge are critical but often deficient teacher competencies [17]. Students believed such understanding could help teachers relate concepts using examples from Chinese culture as scaffolds. As one stated: "Use Chinese stories sometimes so we grasp ideas better."

Strategic native language support aids comprehension, but teachers lacked training in how to judiciously leverage L1 advantages [18].

While surveys indicated 95% of teachers had studied abroad, students considered this insufficient for developing cross-cultural awareness and full English fluency. For example, some teachers lacked strategies for promoting academic language while also developing social English. Students specifically noted needs for training in second language acquisition stages, differentiation, and cross-cultural awareness [19]. As an interviewee observed: “Just visiting America doesn’t mean teachers understand my culture or speak naturally.” Indeed, research shows substantial immersive experience is key for fluency and cultural augmentation [11]. Thus, findings converged to demonstrate urgent needs for robust training focused on differentiation, multicultural knowledge, strategic L1 use, and advanced oral fluency development to strengthen teachers’ capacities for effective ESL pedagogy in this context.

Regarding instruction, students desired more communicative activities but said teachers relied on repetitive lectures and worksheets [20]. They felt group discussions, simulations, and games would be more engaging while allowing authentic language practice. Students also highlighted the need for comprehension checks requiring demonstration of skills, rather than shallow yes/no questions [15]. This signals teachers may lack understanding of interactive techniques and multifaceted assessment beneficial for adolescent ELLs.

## 5. Conclusions

In summary, the results analysis highlights the importance of teacher education in providing effective language teaching and learning support for students, including enhanced differentiation training, cultural knowledge, and interactive pedagogies. The findings contribute specifically to research on components of quality ESL education for Chinese adolescent ELLs. This study’s quantitative and qualitative results highlight critical needs in ESL teacher preparation and classroom practices in Chinese urban high schools. The mixed efficacy and qualifications point to gaps in pre-service training and professional development, consistent with literature on essential teacher competencies [20,21]. Students’ perspectives further reveal areas for growth in differentiation, scaffolding, cultural knowledge, and activity design [22]. Taken together, the findings underscore key recommendations from research on components of quality ESL education [20,23]. Targeted improvements in teacher education can enhance pedagogical skills and knowledge to better serve diverse urban ESL learners. By illuminating context-specific instructional needs, this study provides a valuable model for conducting comprehensive, evidence-based assessments of teacher competencies to guide professional development improvements. Further research should continue investigating practices that optimize urban secondary ELL achievement.

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