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Factors affecting English teaching and learning in Chinese secondary schools

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Abstract

The teaching and learning of English first additional language (FAL) in schools are influenced by several factors. This article reports on findings of a case study in which we sought to identify factors that influenced English FAL teaching and learning practices in Chinese secondary schools. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews and lesson observations involving non-native English teachers from 3 secondary schools in mainland China and analysed using the thematic analysis approach. Despite different pedagogical approaches and learning materials used, it emerged that the teaching of English FAL was influenced by several factors including large class sizes, the lack of teacher autonomy and the impact of an exam-oriented system. With this article we examine these factors, which influenced the effective teaching and learning of English FAL from the teachers' perspectives. We also discuss several strategies the teachers considered to be effective in facilitating the enhancement of English FAL teaching and learning practices in the secondary schools under study.

Keywords: autonomy; English first additional language; learner autonomy; lesson planning; reflective practice; teaching and learning practices

Introduction

Education in China places emphasis on the learning and teaching of English as a primary foreign language in their schools (Cheng, 2008; Kong, 2017). The on-going increase in demand for English-speaking bilinguals in China is a result of various factors, which includes the continued development agenda in the tourism industry, international trade and the drive towards the internationalisation of education. In the past, large international events played a major role in increasing the need for bilingual English-speakers in the country (Feng, 2012). In addition, Gao's (2012) study emphasises the enduring perception of English as a gateway to the future. This perspective highlights the significance placed on both the learning and teaching of English first additional language (FAL) in Chinese schools across mainland China. Anecdotally, there is an increasing demand for learning English at all levels in Chinese schools. In general, a considerable majority of Chinese learners are opting to learn English, formally or informally, because they perceive the language to be key to their success in different areas including professional and business environments.

With the research reported on here we aimed to identify the factors that influenced the learning and teaching of English in secondary schools in mainland China. Furthermore, we investigated potential approaches that could be used to improve language learning. While focusing on mainland Chinese secondary school settings, we also incorporated a review of global literature concerning English language education in various countries, including South Africa. This comprehensive approach not only provided a clearer understanding of the current state of English FAL teaching and learning in secondary schools in mainland China but also yielded valuable knowledge that could benefit English educators in other countries with comparable conditions.

The study involved two research questions: 1) What do the teachers consider to be the main factors influencing the learning and teaching of English FAL in Chinese secondary schools?; 2) From the teachers' perspectives, how can the learning and teaching of English FAL be improved in Chinese secondary schools?

The literature provides evidence that the problems and challenges experienced in the Chinese secondary school context resonate with what is happening in countries such as South Africa where English is taught to diverse language learner groups as an additional language. It is hoped that this study would be of importance to a wide range of readers, in particular, language educators, as it provides the context for discussing problems and possible solutions to improve the teaching and learning of English FAL, as well as English home language (HL) in secondary schools.

Literature Review

The initial stage of the study involved a desk-based literature review to identify some of the factors that militated against the teaching and learning of English FAL in secondary schools in China and in other countries. This helped to provide a comprehensive understanding of the issues that have an impact on language learning, and which is in line with the study's two main research questions. The first part of the literature review focuses on the general features of the learning and teaching of English FAL in Chinese secondary school contexts. This is followed by a review of the problems and challenges of learning and teaching of English FAL in China and beyond. This theoretical overview provides the framework for discussing the two main research questions, namely, 1) What are the factors influencing the learning and teaching of English FAL in Chinese secondary

schools? and, 2) From the teachers' perspectives, how can the enhancement of English FAL learning and teaching in Chinese secondary schools be achieved?

Chinese learners at all levels approach the learning of English FAL seriously (Cheng, 2008; Kong, 2017). In addition, one of the key concepts adopted in English FAL classrooms is autonomous learning. This emerged as a result of the realisation that learner autonomy is significant in promoting effective language learning (Feryok, 2013). Autonomous learning requires learners to take on more responsibility for their learning. In other words, they become more independent and self-directed in the learning process (Kong, 2017). For learners to set their own goals, reflect on their progress, and seek opportunities to practise outside the classroom, teachers should become autonomous too. This approach requires adopting learner-centred approaches as well as empowering learners to keep diaries of their learning approaches with the view of identifying how they learn best. Chan (2003:49) argues that "teachers who want to help learners to function autonomously have to learn to let go." In this case, Chan (2003) refers to a shift in the way in which teachers think and deliver teaching by creating learning environments that support learners to take charge of their learning, while the teachers act as facilitators or guides on the side.

Globally, the development of learner autonomy has gained traction in most English FAL and English HL classrooms. At the same time, there is a noticeable gap in the development of learner autonomy in non-Western regions, for example, in Asia and in the Middle East compared to the Western countries like the United Kingdom ([UK] Kong, 2017). As a result, the focus in Chinese FAL classrooms is now on cultivating independent and self-directed learners (Gao, 2012).

However, English FAL teaching and learning in Chinese secondary schools face their own set of challenges. More than a decade ago, Hu (2005) highlighted the poor communicative competence of most of the learners in secondary schools in mainland China. Similarly, Xie (2010) indicates that, in many cases, priority is given to the development of input skills like reading and listening at the expense of production skills like speaking and writing. In addition, several factors have been highlighted in literature to explain some of the difficulties in the teaching and learning of English FAL. These include the examination-driven nature of teaching and learning (Lau & Lee, 2008), which emphasises grammatical skills development (Arndt, Harvey & Nuttall, 2000), maintains traditional teacher-student relationships (Zhou, Ma & Deci, 2009), and inadequate resources to cater for the needs of large classes in rural areas (Hu, 2005). The problems identified in

Chinese secondary schools are similar to some of the problems in other countries where English FAL is taught. For example, according to Rwodzi, De Jager and Mpofu (2020), some of the secondary schools in South Africa do not have adequate resources to support the teaching of English FAL and English HL, and some of the English teachers are not pedagogically capacitated. Fleisch (2008) provides some important insights involving primary schools in South Africa. The study depicted that there was a complex interaction of factors that caused underachievement of South African learners in the participating schools. These factors included negative attitudes of teachers towards the learners, inadequate methods of instruction, underutilisation of existing resources and student absenteeism. Although the study focused on the primary school context, the factors they identified also apply to secondary school teaching. For instance, teachers' attitudes can affect the learners' academic performance in any context. While these issues may not be a reflection of the current overall situation in all South African schools, the teaching challenges of English FAL are highlighted. Teachers play a crucial role in improving teaching and learning experiences. However, teacher agency is closely connected to the structures and cultures within the school and extends beyond it (Biesta, Priestley & Robinson, 2015). Teachers interpret and adapt the curriculum to meet the diverse needs of their learners. They ensure that the content is relevant and engaging, making learning more effective. In addition, by reflecting on their teaching methods and student outcomes, teachers identify areas for improvement. This self-assessment allows them to refine their approaches and enhance the learning experience. In the same vein, teachers often work together to share best practices, resources and strategies. This collaboration fosters a supportive community that contributes to overall teaching improvement.

Although several studies have highlighted the existence of problems in English FAL instruction in China (Hu, 2005; Li, 2003; Liao, 2004; Xie, 2010), the number of studies focusing on the discussion of some of the current changes and developments in English FAL teaching and learning methods used in Chinese secondary schools are limited. As a result, with this study we sought to highlight the factors affecting English FAL teaching and learning in Chinese secondary schools. As argued by Hu (2005), the Chinese education system was characterised by the use of teacher-centred approaches in the past.

However, the changes experienced in the wider society appear to be shaping the way that schools define teaching and learning strategies. As a result, the Ministry of Education in mainland China has now included autonomous learning as one of the key educational goals. Yong (2015:216)

supports the emphasis on developing independent learners and asserts that “developments in technology and society have made an undeniable contribution to the spread of autonomy.” In the same vein, in South African schools, the advent of technology has encouraged teachers to use technology-enhanced learning tools including social media (Rwodzi et al., 2020). As a result, one of the fundamental questions that we considered was: “To what extent is the education system in mainland China prepared to embrace all these changes and what is happening in schools now, in particular, in the English FAL classrooms in secondary schools?” The research method adopted for the study is discussed in the next section.

Method

We sought to identify the factors affecting the English FAL teaching and learning practices in three secondary schools in mainland China. This was a small-scale qualitative study that involved working with nine English FAL teachers who were drawn from three secondary schools located in one province in China. Three teachers from each school volunteered to participate in the study. All the teachers were Chinese and used English as an additional language. Although gender was not an important variable, four of the teachers who participated in the study were male and five were female. The study involved working with English FAL teachers who had at least 2 years of teaching experience to ensure that they had enough experience to articulate the issues under consideration. The selected teachers’ work experience ranged between 3 and 15 years, which enabled us to gather the views of the more experienced as well as relatively novice teachers teaching at the schools.

We deliberately selected the participating schools to ensure that we could easily access them and, at the same time, help us to generate reliable data to answer their main research questions. We considered that the use of case studies was an effective approach that would facilitate their exploration of the factors affecting the teaching of English FAL (Flyvbjerg, 2006). We considered that the findings would provide sufficient insights into the factors affecting the effective teaching of English FAL within the Chinese secondary schooling context.

We employed two qualitative data collection methods including lesson observations and semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were selected because of their flexibility. Each teacher was interviewed for only half an hour to avoid disrupting other teacher activities in the schools, and an interview guide was used to elicit responses (Bryman, 2006). Two important considerations were reflected on in the design of the teacher interviews. Firstly, the perspectives of

teachers regarding the current state of English FAL instruction in schools were probed, and this included the curriculum content, pedagogical approaches and the main problems and/or challenges faced in English FAL classrooms in China. Secondly, we considered the teachers’ perspectives on the ways in which the teaching of English FAL could be improved in schools.

All interviews were conducted in Mandarin to ensure that the teachers could share their experiences and views freely without having any language barriers. Each of the interviews was audio-recorded, transcribed and then translated into English prior to reflexive thematic analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2013). This was done in line with the advice given by Hennink, Hutter and Bailey (2011) who emphasise the importance of working with verbatim transcripts in the original language (Chinese), which were subsequently translated into a second transcript for the language of the study (English), to avoid losing any valuable interview data.

According to May (2001), recording helps interpretation by allowing the interviewer to concentrate on asking questions and capturing the non-verbal cues. As a result, we resorted to record and transcribe all interviews even though transcription was time-consuming. We transcribed all interviews to uphold our ethical commitment to ensure participant confidentiality and anonymity. To validate the data, electronic mails (emails) were sent to all the participating teachers in which they were asked to check their individual interview transcripts and provide feedback. This approach ensured that the participants could judge the accuracy and credibility of the recorded accounts (Smith & McGannon, 2018).

To complement the interview data, each teacher was observed once while conducting a lesson. In line with Hennink et al. (2011), observations allowed us to obtain a fuller understanding of the classroom context and to situate the teachers within their own socio-cultural contexts. We took notes during the lesson observation exercise and requested the teachers to provide us with teaching and learning materials.

We used the thematic analysis approach as described by Clarke and Braun (2013) to analyse the qualitative data generated in the study. This approach was more intuitive and faster than other qualitative data analysis approaches such as content analysis (Humble & Mozelius, 2022). As we attempted to be reflexive in the data analysis process, we found the framework provided by Clarke and Braun (2013) useful. The data analysis process involved reading the interview transcripts and the lesson observation notes several times to become familiar with the data, generate the initial codes, and identify the recurring themes in the data. The main themes drawn from the data aligned with

the main research questions, namely: teacher perspectives on the factors affecting the learning and teaching of English in Chinese secondary schools, and recommendations for improving the teaching and learning of English FAL in Chinese secondary schools.

We were keen to establish, from the teachers' perspectives, how any of the identified problems and/or challenges in the teaching and learning of English FAL could be addressed. During the data analysis process, the interview transcripts revealed that the teachers shared several factors that influenced the learning and teaching of English FAL in Chinese secondary schools, and these led to the construction of five subthemes, namely: curriculum content, teaching approaches, examination impact, learning motivation, class size and English proficiency levels. For the second theme, the teachers shared their thoughts about approaches that could be used to support student language learning. Based on their views drawn from their practice, it emerged that the teachers' views covered different suggestions which led to the construction of three subthemes, namely: lesson planning, teacher autonomy, and reflective practice. These subthemes identified from the data are discussed in detail in the section on findings.

The study was conducted in an ethically sound manner after having obtained permission to carry out the study from the research ethics committee of the university where we were employed. The participants were fully informed about the nature of the study, their involvement to facilitate informed consent and they were also informed about their right to withdraw from the study at any time without giving reasons. We recognised that using a small sample made it difficult to generalise findings, which constituted the study's main limitation.

Study Findings

We established that different teaching approaches were followed in the teaching and learning of English in Chinese secondary schools due to different factors, which are discussed in this section. The main findings from this study were structured based on specific areas aligned with the main research questions, namely:

- 1) What do the teachers consider to be the main factors affecting the learning and teaching of English FAL in the Chinese secondary schools?
- 2) From the teachers' perspectives, how can the enhancement of English FAL learning and teaching in secondary schools be achieved?

Two main themes were identified during the reflexive thematic analysis process, which were closely aligned with the main research questions. The first theme focused on the teachers' perspectives of the factors influencing the learning and teaching of English in Chinese secondary schools. The second theme highlighted the

teachers' perspectives of the approaches that could be adopted to enhance the learning and teaching of English in Chinese secondary schools. These themes and associated subthemes are discussed below.

Theme 1: Teacher Perspectives of the Factors Influencing the Learning and Teaching of English FAL in Chinese Secondary Schools

Several subthemes were constructed during the data analysis process. The subthemes, curriculum content, teaching approaches, impact of examination, learning motivation, class size and English proficiency levels are discussed in the following sections.

Curriculum content

English FAL is taught as a compulsory subject in secondary schools in mainland China. We found that a coursebook series, *Go for it*, was used in all the three participating schools. The book series is edited by foreign experts in English as well as some local English FAL teachers, and published by the Ministry of Education. For the teachers, the coursebook was the cornerstone of the English FAL curriculum in schools. Each participating teacher expressed satisfaction with the coursebook stating that the content was adequate to ensure the development of literacy skills such as reading, speaking, listening and writing. One of the teacher participants said, "*the learners' English learning skills have improved after using the new coursebook, Go for it.*" There was overwhelming consensus that the content of the book was adequately contextualised, which might epitomise the role of local authors in the compilation of the book. The participants described the coursebook as user-friendly as it reflected the learners' everyday life experiences.

The study findings revealed that each English FAL teacher participant was involved in making deliberate and careful selections of learning materials that aligned with the learners' interests to meet their learning needs. For instance, to provide learners with opportunities to implement grammatical structures, some of the teachers shared pictures of well-known celebrities in China such as Jackie Chan, and then asked the learners to respond to the questions they had raised about these people in class. This kind of activity helped to improve learners' speaking skills during the English FAL lessons. We observed that the learners enjoyed the lessons because they resonated with the learners' lived experiences and the activities were engaging and promoted participation. We appreciated the role of authentic learning and the importance of ensuring that the texts were contextualised. Learners were able to talk about the featured celebrities and ask questions based on their own knowledge of familiar people, such as Jackie Chan.

We also observed that some of the English FAL teachers used resources such as English newspapers to develop their learners' reading skills. The learners were asked to read texts from the newspapers that covered stories about some celebrities and famous places in China. Taking the learners' English proficiency levels into account, the teachers assigned appropriate reading or writing tasks to the learners. Another technique that teachers used to encourage learners to engage with independent reading was to focus on articles involving famous fictional characters such as Harry Potter.

However, a few concerns were highlighted regarding the coursebook. For example, teachers raised some concerns about the difficult vocabulary used in the book. In addition, some teachers felt that the content of the coursebooks was not always organised in a way that was easy for the learners to follow. As a result, the teachers needed to scaffold the learners' learning by selecting the texts carefully. These issues were highlighted by the teachers from all the schools involved in the study, indicating that these were common issues and, therefore, these might need to be addressed.

Teaching approaches

All three schools from where the participants were drawn were using different pedagogical approaches. Interestingly, each school employed a different approach. For example, one of the schools employed the communicative language teaching approach while another school used a task-based language teaching approach; the third school used the guidance case study approach. However, it was also quite clear that in all the schools the teachers focussed on encouraging learners to become autonomous learners. One teacher captured the views of all the participating teachers as follows:

I would like to adopt the learner-centred teaching approach. The student is the main part in the learning and teaching of English language. Even the best teacher cannot learn things for their learners. I try to help learners build a habit of participating actively in the learning process rather than being passive learners.

We observed how teachers in all three schools embraced the use of communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches assigning learners small-group activities and pair-work tasks, which afforded them opportunities to develop target language speaking skills independently.

However, teachers from all the participating schools revealed that their learners were not used to working in small groups as they were accustomed to teacher-centred teaching. Secondly, owing to the high number of learners in each class, teachers and learners could not have extended conversations. In addition, some of the learners preferred to use Chinese instead of English to express themselves quickly during the group-work activities. This was

counterproductive as the learners did not use English as the target language. For example, we observed learners using Chinese to complete their tasks during the group-work activities in some lessons. In addition, some learners spoke Chinese while working on the tasks, despite the teachers' constant reminder that learners should "*try to speak English, not Chinese.*" We noted that although the target language in the classrooms was English, multilingualism was not really a problem as it could promote language learning by enabling learners to learn from one another.

The effect of the examination-oriented curriculum was also observed as some teachers felt compelled to focus more on teaching grammar and vocabulary to meet the examination expectations. While the coursebook presented learners with activities aimed at developing all four skills, reading, listening, writing and speaking, the examination lacked the speaking component, placing emphasis on grammar and vocabulary, which does not promote language proficiency.

One other important observation was that the choice of the teaching approach was closely related to the teachers' English language skills. Teachers with more confidence in their speaking ability tended to employ the CLT approach, whereas those teachers who were less confident in their English-speaking skills chose to employ the traditional grammar approach. The teachers' educational background appeared to influence their English teaching practices. For instance, teachers who were trained using the traditional grammar approach continued to use the same approach in their own teaching. This practice is identified by Boughey and McKenna (2016:2) as the "received tradition", which describes that teachers' teaching practices are heavily influenced by the way they were taught.

Impact of examinations

The format of examinations also affected the learning and teaching of English. For instance, the use of multiple-choice questions discourages learners from engaging meaningfully with activities such as reading and writing. In addition, it is possible for learners to pass the examination without understanding the grammatical construction of the sentences. One of the teachers shared how much examinations influenced her teaching practice:

To be honest, for me, no matter what kind of lesson plan, the ultimate aim is to make sure learners pass their examination. As Deng said, 'a black plum is as sweet as a white one.' How to design a lesson plan is not so important, the key is to ensure that it works well for the examination.

Two-thirds of the participating teachers indicated that they were under pressure to drill learners to prepare them to pass the examinations. Some teachers highlighted this as a source of frustration. We observed that teachers who were keen to see

their learners developing holistically, felt that the structure of the examination did not encourage their learners to engage meaningfully in acquiring the different English skills to prepare them to achieve higher proficiency levels.

Similarly, changes in the weighting of specific aspects in the examination also impacted on the way English was taught in the schools. For instance, when the listening skill score in the examinations was increased, the participating teachers revealed that this change resulted in more listening exercises in the current coursebook, compelling them to spend more time on this aspect. In addition, the use of an American accent in the listening examination led to the inclusion of videos created by American native speakers in the coursebook. This created problems for some learners who had to adapt to a foreign accent, which made the learning of the language even harder.

We also established that the absence of a speaking test impacted on the teaching of English in the schools. The participating teachers considered that they were under no pressure to focus on developing learners' speaking skills as this skill was not examined. All the participating teachers concurred that learners were motivated to learn just to pass the examination. This was articulated by one of the teachers who commented as follows:

... examination is the main motivation. I would like to say 80% of the learners are motivated to learn because they want to pass examinations and access a place at a good high school. The other 20% are motivated by their interest to learn another language.

Finally, participating teachers conceded that they often felt more pressure than the learners. One teacher said *"I am not always sure whether I manage to cover all the key points in time for the examinations."* Arguably, this constitutes a problem as learners can be disadvantaged when they participate in a standardised examination if they do not cover all the key elements of the curriculum. In addition, it might be necessary to rethink the amount of content that learners are expected to cover in preparation for the examinations. This also raises the quantity-quality dilemma, which both teachers and learners can face if they are expected to cover much content over a limited time period.

Learning motivation

The study findings show that teachers considered that learners should have both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation to learn the language effectively. Intrinsic motivation is driven by internal rewards and is linked to personal satisfaction and enjoyment of a task (Ushida, 2006). For example, a student might engage in learning a language because it feels fulfilling and

brings joy. On the other hand, extrinsic motivation depends on external rewards or the avoidance of negative outcomes. This could involve studying to achieve good grades or learning a new language to travel abroad. Both forms of motivation play crucial roles in influencing human behaviour, but they originate from different sources and can have varying impacts on how tasks are approached and completed. Understanding the distinction between these two motivation sources could be essential for personal development and achieving goals. In this case, it also influenced the approaches used by the teachers to support the learners in the English classes.

Two teachers from one of the schools emphasised the need to enhance learners' interest in learning English. As a result, they adopted different strategies including the use of speaking competitions and other learning activities such as reading popular novels in English and singing English songs. On the other hand, some teachers focused on ensuring that the learners were prepared to pass the examinations by placing emphasis on the tasks that promoted the examinable skills such as reading, listening and writing. One of the teachers indicated that *"most of the learners aim to pass examinations and then go to a top high school which can assist them to enter a top university."* As a result, the teaching activities often focused on developing the examinable skills only, which excluded speaking skills.

Class size and English proficiency levels

It was revealed that large class sizes and teaching learners who are at different levels of language proficiency were among the main challenges for the participating English teachers. It was clear that teachers found it difficult to interact with learners and give them individual support when they worked in large group settings. The teachers indicated that they would prefer to reduce their class sizes from the current number of 45 to around 15 to 20 learners to enhance the learners' learning. One of the teachers said:

My hope is for every class to have only 15 learners, no more than 20. I know it is very difficult for China since we have such a large population. However, teaching refers to individuals; it's not like producing potatoes. I think it would be very helpful to teaching if we can reduce the number of the class size.

Arguably, by reducing the class sizes, learners could be supported more and, therefore, learn the language better. The teacher-student interactions would also then be increased, thereby, enhancing the opportunity for the learners to ask more questions and to participate more actively in lessons. The teachers also found it difficult to teach groups of learners with different language proficiency levels. The teachers stated that they found it challenging to give guidance and support

to learners who were at different English proficiency levels in the same class. This could be addressed by promoting collaborative group work where learners with different proficiency levels are mixed to ensure that the more knowledgeable ones assist the novice learners as discussed in Vygotsky's (1978) zone of proximal development theory.

Theme 2: Towards the Improvement of English Learning and Teaching in Chinese Secondary Schools

The study findings reveal a range of views on the approaches that could be used to improve the learning and teaching of English in the Chinese secondary schools. On the one hand, the participating English teachers were content with how language was being taught while, on the other hand, they felt that teaching practices could be different. For instance, teachers were quite satisfied with the existing coursebook stating that the coursebook provided learners with opportunities to develop their communication skills. However, the teachers also highlighted several issues of concern. Some of the factors are therefore highlighted in this section, including lesson planning, teacher autonomy and reflective practices that the participating English teachers felt could be key in improving the learning and teaching of English. Arguably, the highlighted factors cannot address all the different problems and/or challenges that the teachers face.

Lesson planning

Most of the English FAL teachers felt satisfied with the collaborative approach to lesson-plan design. They appreciated the opportunity to exchange ideas and enrich their lesson plans when working together. The idea of collaborating with other schools was also flagged, which could be achieved through workshops or by introducing competitions among teachers to come up with innovative lesson designs. Although there was talk of collaboration, these teachers also felt that this should not undermine teacher autonomy. The teachers should have the autonomy to design their lessons in ways that facilitated their diverse student needs. Lesson planning is a crucial tool for managing large classes effectively. For instance, a well-organised lesson plan ensures that the class runs smoothly, with clear objectives and activities that keep learners engaged. Lesson plans can also include strategies for differentiating teaching to meet the diverse needs of the learners. In addition, lesson plans for classroom management, including rules and procedures, may help to maintain discipline and minimise disruptions in large classes.

Teacher autonomy

The participating teachers had the autonomy to design teaching practices to meet the needs of their

learners. However, they reported that they could not make certain decisions, for instance, they could not easily change the venue of the lessons from an indoor to an outdoor lesson. For this to happen, they needed to get permission from the school management. It appears that the teachers in the schools under study had to follow the prescribed curriculum including the content, the pedagogical approaches and the lesson location. As a result, when asked for their view on this, the teachers expressed that they preferred to have the autonomy to plan and deliver the course in the way they chose, including conducting practical dialogues outside classrooms or showing movies to enhance the learners' interest in language learning. By empowering teachers with autonomy, schools can create a more adaptable, responsive, and engaging curriculum that better serves the needs of all learners.

Reflective practice

The study findings highlight the importance of becoming reflective practitioners. All the English FAL teachers felt that there was value in having opportunities to reflect on their practices to enhance the quality of English FAL learning and teaching in schools. Reflection was perceived as a source of innovation as teachers felt that they could introduce new ideas in their classes to improve learner language learning. For example, related to what has been discussed, some of the ideas included the choice of the learning environment. Although the teachers were advocating for something as simple as that, it was not possible to change the location within the existing structures of the schools. Through reflection, teachers could think about their teaching philosophy to develop a better understanding of how to support learners to develop an additional language. For example, one teacher said:

... according to learners' feedback, I will amend or change some details of my teaching. I have two classes. If I realize that learners in Class 1 found it hard to follow or understand something, I will consider improving the teaching framework or reducing the difficulty in Class 2.

Teachers also found it helpful to improve English FAL instruction in the schools by building and maintaining good professional relationships with learners. In this case, the teachers referred to the importance of ensuring that learners could approach them for help. This included being available either for face-to-face or online drop-in sessions. The teachers considered that by providing such opportunities, learners would be supported to learn better. One of the teachers articulated the views of all the participating teachers well by stating that *"the communication between learners and teachers is very important. Teachers are supposed to give learners proper instruction and encourage them to study and not to disappoint*

them.” They talked about using praise to encourage learners and to build their confidence in language learning. Reflective practice is a powerful tool for professional growth and improvement. By reflecting on their practice, teachers can make sense of their experiences and identify lessons they can learn from those experiences. Reflection could be useful to identify areas where the teachers needed support, for example, this might involve learning more skills on how to manage large classes or how to design more engaging activities to facilitate learner engagement.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, the study findings are discussed in light of the existing literature. The findings are arranged under the two main themes aligned with the main research questions.

Factors Affecting the Learning and Teaching of English

The study findings reveal that the learning and teaching of English in Chinese secondary schools are influenced by several factors which include the curriculum content (for example, the core textbook used), teaching approaches, impact of the examinations, learner motivation, class size and English proficiency levels. These different factors are discussed in this section with reference to the literature that was reviewed, where possible. We reiterate the importance of ensuring that the curriculum content, that is, the content of the core English language textbooks, is contextualised to facilitate learning. In addition, the textbooks should be user-friendly, that is, use vocabulary that facilitates learning, that makes it easy to understand, but that is also challenging enough for learners to deduce the meanings from the contexts. In addition, the content must be organised logically with appropriate activities for learners. This would be where the teacher’s scaffolding plays an important role, as the teachers could help select learning tasks that are related to specific themes or skills to support their learners who might struggle to make the connections independently.

The need to contextualise the learning materials was a theme or factor that could be important in other countries, such as South Africa, with learners from diverse backgrounds. In these contexts, it is important to ensure that the learning tasks resonate with the learner’s lived experiences. Understandably, while contextualising the learning materials helps the learners to relate to what they are experiencing in their daily lives, it could be argued that this did not help to alleviate the challenges of using English FAL as the medium of instruction. Arguably, this may also affect the teaching of English as HL. However, it is fair to say that this approach helps the learners to make connections and triggers prior knowledge.

However, it is still important to consider the adoption of multilingual approaches in contexts where learners use various languages (Knaus & Brown, 2017).

The study findings also reveal the benefits of having learners work collaboratively in small groups. Given the large class sizes, the teachers employed small-group activities, which they believed worked well for learners to practise the use of the target language independently. The findings confirm observations made by Jia-Lin (2017) that group work provides learners with opportunities to develop their language skills as well as the enhancement of fluency and effective communication. Learners could help each other in the language learning process within their peer groups ensuring that teachers were no longer perceived as the only sources of support in language learning (Legenhausen, 2001; Ma, Yao & Xu, 2022). The use of groupwork activities is an important pedagogical approach that can be adopted by teachers in South African schools who have been described as lacking pedagogical skills (Rwodzi et al., 2020). More importantly, the teachers should be trained to minimise talking during the group-work activities to ensure that learners have the opportunities to learn from one another and to assume more responsibility for their language learning.

It was evident from the study that examinations played an important role in the way English was taught in schools. This study finding resonates with observations made from previous studies, for example, it has been shown that examinations have an impact on the choice of the teaching approach as well as the curriculum planning (Kong, 2017). In the same vein, Deci and Ryan (2002) comment that teachers often feel obliged to adopt certain approaches to meet the examination expectations. In addition, as most teachers focus on preparing learners to pass entrance examinations, they do not bother about developing speaking skills that are not examined. This phenomenon has persisted for a long time, and Vernon (1956, cited in Alderson & Wall, 1993:115) posits that “teachers tend to ignore topics and activities which do not refer directly to passing the examination.” However, Reeve (2002) asserts that learners learn better if they are not under pressure from an examination-oriented curriculum.

On the other hand, one participating teacher felt that examinations helped to motivate learners to learn as examinations constituted the driving force for most of the learners learning English in China. To enter senior high school, learners must pass English. Similarly, to graduate with an undergraduate degree learners should pass English (Cheng, 2008; Jia-Lin, 2017). Learners work hard to pass with top grades in their examinations as this

guarantees them a place in the high-ranked schools in the country, and this will help them to be enrolled into top educational institutions in China (Eckstein & Noah, 1993). This makes it challenging for teachers to change their approaches to teaching the language, which is dictated largely by the format and structure of the examination. Arguably, it is a concern that the teaching and learning of English in Chinese secondary schools are driven by examinations.

As a result, it is important for the education authorities, in this case, the Ministry of Education, to provide teachers with the relevant training in pedagogy to equip them with the appropriate approaches that enhance proficiency in English. A good example of this is how the Ministry of Education in Saudi Arabia promoted the use of pedagogic language learning strategies, for example, the CLT approaches, to prevent teaching language “as a number of discrete or disconnected rather than integrated skills” (Fareh, 2010:3603).

Our study findings also identify the importance of motivation in English learning and teaching. These results resonate with Ushida’s (2006) observation that motivation is an essential component for success in language learning. The extent to which learners can engage with learning is influenced by the level of motivation and attitudes towards the language. This view is supported by Oxford and Nyikos (1989) who assert that motivated learners tend to use more strategies in language learning compared to less motivated learners. If there is a clear incentive to learn an additional language, learners are more likely to engage and learn more.

Zhou et al. (2009) are of the opinion that there is a tendency for learners to feel obliged to learn because they need to pass an examination, as opposed to being self-motivated. On the other hand, examinations can instil a sense of pressure, obligation and can lead to some resistance. Although learners might work hard to excel in the examination, they may not be able to link what they are learning with their daily lives. For instance, examinations place emphasis on grammar and many learners do not see the relevance of this in their real lives. One teacher commented that “*if they [learners] become taxi drivers, what they need is the simple communicative language.*”

The views held by these teachers are consistent with Zhou et al.’s (2009) observation that intrinsic motivation is a key factor in the learning of English as this contributes to a high level of interest, commitment and choice. Learners should, therefore, be supported to develop autonomous motivation to facilitate language learning. There was evidence that teachers in all the participating schools were devising various methods to enhance learner interest in English, for example, the choice of topics was selected carefully

to ensure that they motivate learners to use the language.

The study findings reiterate that class size impacted on learners’ learning. As discussed in existing literature, our study shows that teachers felt that small class sizes facilitated effective language learning. This resonates with various studies, which suggest that the groups should not be more than five members and discouraged groups larger than six (Kooloos, Klaasen, Vereijken, Van Kuppeveld, Bolhuis & Vorstenbosch, 2011). However, it was beyond the scope of this study to explore the appropriate class or group sizes for effective language learning. Arguably, in a large group setting, teachers find it harder to sustain a long conversation with individual learners. The impact of class size on learner outcomes is well-documented in the literature. For instance, in South African schools, the problem of class size, particularly in public schools (Gustafsson & Mabogoane, 2012; Howie, 2005). However, it must be borne in mind that other factors also play a role in the quality of learner outcomes (Fleisch, 2008). For example, in Chinese secondary schools, similar to some of the South African schools, the teachers’ limited English proficiency was identified as one of the factors that impacted on learner outcomes as well (Nel & Müller, 2010).

Approaches Enhancing the Learning and Teaching of English

The study findings highlight some approaches that could be embraced to enhance the teaching and learning of English in schools. It was shown that teachers should have the freedom to plan and deliver lessons as they wanted. This autonomy should allow teachers to adapt their learning activities to the needs of their learners. In addition, teachers should use authentic examples in their lessons. Willis and Willis (2007) argue for authentic learning activities which provide the learners with meaningful learning experiences. Authentic learning refers to learning that presents the learners with the opportunities to establish links between what they are learning, and what their daily life experiences involve.

The study findings emphasise the importance of being reflective practitioners. As reflected in the literature, teachers felt that being reflective practitioners would facilitate the identification of areas for teaching practice improvement as well as areas that needed reinforcement. For example, one of the teachers talked about how he might change the teaching approach when he realised that it was not effective. For example, he talked about how he would avoid using CLT when working with learners with low language proficiency. Their views resonate with existing literature, which emphasises reflective practice (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Schön, 1983). Teachers in all the

participating schools were being encouraged to use checklists for self-assessment. This reflective practice was believed to contribute significantly to the teachers' professional development. This approach is also helpful in encouraging teachers to become autonomous, that is, being able to define their own personal goals for their ongoing professional reflection (Kong, 2017).

The findings also reiterate the importance of building positive relationships between teachers and learners. Bullough (2008) asserts that the nature of relationship between teachers and learners is fundamentally important for any quality language learning experience. Similarly, Farrell (2010) contends that the nature of the relationship between teachers and learners determines the interactions in and outside class. This supports an old Chinese adage that a strong rapport between students and their teacher often leads to greater appreciation of the teacher's lessons. What this means is that, if teachers and learners establish good working relationships, this could likely promote effective language learning. Therefore, the need to ensure good teacher-student relationships in English classrooms cannot be over-emphasised. A teacher with positive attributes will attract the learners' attention and, therefore, promote their learning.

Teachers could use several approaches to build good relationships with their learners. This might include giving praise and encouragement, which has the potential to improve learners' confidence levels and motivate them to learn a language. As Isenbarger and Zembylas (2006:123) find, "taking the time to listen to students' problems or worries, giving advice or guidance to them, and showing warmth and love are all examples of emotional work in teaching." It is important for teachers to encourage, motivate and show sensitivity towards their learners' learning. In addition to praising or encouraging them, learners also like to see teachers who show them that they care, love and respect them and that they are approachable and accessible when learners need help. Although learners make mistakes, teachers should extend their care and support for learners to appreciate that making mistakes is part of the learning process.

Conclusion

With this study we sought to increase the understanding of the factors affecting the teaching and learning of English in secondary schools in China. We established that several factors influence the learning and teaching of English FAL in secondary schools in mainland China. It was revealed that a new coursebook was being used at different levels, the examination had a new structure, which placed emphasis on the development of listening skills. However, the

coursebook had been designed to reflect the changes in the examination structure, for example, following a change in listening scores from 20 to 25, more listening activities were included in the coursebook to give learners more opportunities to prepare for the examinations.

However, the teaching and learning of English FAL present problems. For instance, English instruction continues to be driven by the examinations. This means that, in most cases, teachers find themselves having to make teaching decisions based on the national examinations (Deci & Ryan, 2002). Arguably, improving English proficiency levels should never depend on examinations and teacher autonomy alone. For example, using teacher-centred approaches will not help improve the learners' level of proficiency. What is more important is for teachers to focus on English-teaching approaches that are learner-centred, communicative, text-based, relevant to learners and include all the language skills (writing, speaking, reading and listening) as well as inductive practices so that learner discovery can take place, which will improve English proficiency levels.

Although the participating teachers were generally happy with the current coursebook, they also felt that the content was not always organised in a logical sequence. Similar to findings in the literature, we established that learners were still being motivated to learn English because of the examinations. However, there is evidence in the literature that examination-oriented systems did not help to develop self-motivated learners, but learners that only focussed on passing examinations. This perspective is further buttressed by Zhou et al. (2009) who consider that examinations compel learners to learn even when they do not feel they should. The English FAL teachers emphasised the need for learners to be intrinsically motivated to improve their learning of English. Their views concur with observations by Zhou et al. (2009) who argue that intrinsic motivation constitutes an integral part in English learning stating that intrinsic motivation contributes to higher levels of interest.

In addition, we found that large class sizes and different attainment levels continued to impact negatively on the teaching of English. As expected, all the teachers indicated that small class sizes would make it easier to help learners to learn better. This is because teachers would have more opportunities to interact and give individual support to learners in small classes. Learners with different proficiency levels in the same class make it harder for teachers to design lessons. As a result, a suggestion was made that schools should establish a multi-level teaching strategy where learners could be placed at different levels depending on their proficiency levels. However, the use of

collaborative groups could also help to support the learners who were less proficient by placing them in groups where the more knowledgeable others could help them. The other strategy involves the use of differentiated tasks that could be applied to classes with learners with mixed proficiency levels.

Most importantly, this study highlights some approaches that teachers could follow to enhance English learning and teaching in different contexts. Designing lesson plans is key to the delivery of effective English lessons and participating teachers appreciated the value of collaborative lesson planning.

Teachers also reiterated the need for them to have the autonomy to decide how they wanted to teach language in their classes as well as the choice to determine the appropriate learning environment. While teacher autonomy is important, this should not be a licence for teachers to revert to teaching using traditional grammar-based lessons. Such practices do not tally with the autonomous teaching practice, which clearly indicates the importance of developing self-directed learning. However, teachers should be able to choose whether to teach the lessons in the classroom environment or to include practical dialogue activities outside the classroom, or to find ways of making the lessons more interesting by getting learners to engage in activities such as watching movies or singing English songs. Willis and Willis (2007) emphasise the significance of teacher autonomy and the use of authentic learning activities stating that these activities encourage learners to engage actively in the process of meaning construction.

The participating teachers also emphasised the significance of becoming reflective practitioners to enhance their teaching practices and to improve students' learning experience in the English classrooms, which resonates with other studies (Richards & Lockhart, 1994; Schön, 1983).

Our study provided teachers with the opportunity to reiterate the significance of establishing and maintaining good professional relationships with learners, highlighting how this helped to promote effective English learning and teaching. Building close relationships with learners would build the learners' confidence levels and help them to learn the language better.

Even though this was a small-scale study, several important findings were established. Hopefully, the issues raised in this study could be considered in more detail and on a larger scale to increase an awareness of the issues encountered – not only in English classrooms but also in the teaching of other languages in and outside Chinese secondary schools. Some key pedagogical ideas such as fostering learner autonomy and embracing pedagogic approaches that foster proficiency in English are vitally important for the enhancement of language learning in different contexts.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors were responsible for the conceptualisation of the project, the data collection, and the analysis. PPK compiled the first draft while CYL did the final proofreading and submission of the article.

Notes

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