BRU ELT JOURNAL
Vol.4 No.1 (January-April) 2026
ISSN 2822-1311 (Online)

Exploring Chinese Teachers' Experiences in Teaching English as a Foreign Language Focusing on Large Class Management: A Case of One Beijing Elementary School

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Received: December 10, 2025
Revised: January 29, 2026
Accepted: February 3, 2026

Abstract

This study explored Chinese primary school EFL teachers' experiences, large-class size management practices, and guidelines needs within the context of recent educational reforms. Using a convergent mixed-methods design, the research collected questionnaire responses from 43 teachers, the whole population, and conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 teachers from a school in Beijing. The quantitative findings from the questionnaire revealed that teachers reported relatively strong colleague support (M=4.11) and the lowest mean score for workload manageable (M=2.91), indicating significant stress in large-class teaching environments. Regarding management strategies for large class sizes, preventive and organizational measures (e.g., establishing classroom routines, addressing disruptions) were employed more frequently. Assessment-related findings further indicate that while the use of quick formative assessments was moderately frequent (M=3.79), providing timely personalized feedback in large classes was perceived as particularly challenging, scoring lowest in this domain (M=3.08). The qualitative findings from semi-structured interviews provided deeper insights. Teachers consistently described heavy administrative burdens and non-teaching workloads as the most prominent challenges (N=41). Interview data also highlighted difficulties in addressing student ability differences when class sizes frequently exceeded 40 students (N=37). Furthermore, teachers expressed ambivalent attitudes towards educational technology: while acknowledging its potential value, they reported inadequate instructional training and increased operational burdens that hindered effective classroom implementation. The qualitative findings contextualize statistical trends by explaining how systemic pressures, class size, and limited institutional support collectively shape teachers' instructional choices and professional confidence within the context of teaching foreign languages in large classes.

Keywords: Chinese EFL teachers, teacher experience, large-class management, teaching workload, elementary school

Introduction

English has become a core subject in Chinese basic education due to globalization, national strategic demands, and curriculum reforms emphasizing communicative competence (Ministry of Education, 2011). Beijing, as a resource-intensive and policy-driven educational hub, presents both exemplary practices and heightened complexities in elementary EFL teaching. Despite relatively strong infrastructure and teacher qualifications, EFL teachers in Beijing face persistent tensions arising from mixed-ability classrooms, large class sizes, policy expectations, and the integration of educational technologies.

The Double Reduction Policy was introduced with the aim of improving in-school learning quality and reducing students' academic burden. According to policy reports issued by the Beijing Education Commission (2023), the policy has also reshaped teachers' work conditions by increasing instructional and administrative responsibilities, while disparities in learning outcomes continue to exist as some families rely on private tutoring. Within this policy context, EFL teachers are required to balance communicative language teaching with exam-oriented demands, address differentiated learning needs in large classes, integrate digital tools, and respond to growing administrative requirements.

While existing studies have primarily examined these issues at the macro policy or systemic level, there remains a relative lack of micro-level, classroom-based empirical evidence that captures how teachers experience and respond to these pressures in their everyday teaching practices-particularly in resource-rich yet structurally complex contexts such as Beijing.

This study seeks to address this gap by examining the lived experiences and instructional practices of elementary EFL teachers in a Beijing primary school education context. Adopting a mixed-methods approach, the study focuses on how teachers navigate daily instructional and administrative challenges, manage large class sizes, and develop coping and adaptive strategies within Beijing's distinctive educational ecology.

The specific content of this study is as follows:

1. What are the experiences of Chinese EFL teachers at this elementary school in Beijing?
2. How do the Chinese EFL teachers manage large class sizes (over 40 students) classrooms?
3. What can be guidelines for Chinese EFL teachers for improvement?

Literature Review

1. Teacher Experience and Instructional Practice in EFL Contexts

Teachers' experience is widely recognized as a multidimensional construct shaping instructional decision-making, classroom interaction, and professional development. In EFL contexts, accumulated teaching experience contributes to teachers' pedagogical content knowledge, enabling them to manage classroom dynamics, design lessons, and respond to students' diverse learning needs (Shulman, 1987). Practical experience becomes particularly critical in large-class environments, where monitoring student behavior, sustaining engagement, and allocating attention pose significant challenges (Kagan, 1992; Emmer & Sabornie, 2015).

Research indicates that experienced teachers are more adept at adapting instructional strategies to varied class sizes and learner diversity. Approaches such as group work, task-based activities, and cooperative learning have been shown to support sustained participation in large or heterogeneous classrooms (ikolov & Dörnyei, 2002; Shamim, 1993). Moreover, experienced teachers demonstrate greater sensitivity to contextual cues and adjust their practices accordingly (Tsui, 2003). Reflective practice further enhances teachers' professional growth, as sustained reflection enables refinement of beliefs and instructional approaches over time (Schön, 1983; Guskey, 2002).

2. Classroom Management in Large EFL Classes

Classroom management remains a central concern in EFL teaching, particularly in large classes where student engagement and potential disruption are more pronounced. Kounin's (1970) Classroom Management Theory emphasizes proactive strategies over reactive discipline, highlighting concepts such as "withitness," "overlapping," and "momentum" as essential for maintaining instructional flow. In EFL classrooms, effective classroom management supports not only behavioral order but also meaningful language use and interaction.

Empirical studies suggest that teachers who demonstrate strong situational awareness and intervene early can significantly reduce off-task behavior, especially in large or multicultural classrooms (Emmer & Everson, 2016). Well-managed classrooms provide structured and supportive learning environments that facilitate language acquisition, enhance student motivation, and improve learning outcomes. As such, classroom management constitutes a foundational component of effective EFL instruction rather than a peripheral skill.

3. Policy Context and the Specificity of Chinese EFL Teaching

EFL teaching in China operates within a distinct policy and institutional context that shapes teachers' instructional practices and professional experiences. English is introduced as a compulsory subject in primary schools from Grade 3, resulting in early and intensive exposure to English learning within an examination-oriented system. This structure places considerable instructional and managerial demands on teachers, particularly in large classes where balancing curriculum requirements and learner diversity becomes complex.

In recent years, Chinese EFL teachers have increasingly adopted Classroom-Based Assessment (CBA) approaches, including formative assessment and task-based evaluation (Wang, 2022). This contrasts with practices in some other EFL contexts, such as Vietnam or Thailand, where assessment remains largely summative and institutional support for CBA is limited (Nguyen, 2021). The shift toward CBA reflects broader curricular reforms positioning teachers as facilitators of learning rather than mere transmitters of knowledge.

China also demonstrates distinctive features in teacher professional development and educational technology integration. National policies promote structured professional development, including school-based inquiry and peer reflection (Li, 2023), while technological innovations such as AI- and AR-supported instruction are increasingly explored in EFL classrooms (Zhou & Yan, 2023). Additionally, Chinese

EFL instruction emphasizes cultural and emotional dimensions, encouraging teachers to integrate national and intercultural elements into language teaching (Zhang, 2021).

Method

1. Research Design

A convergent parallel mixed-methods design was employed, integrating quantitative questionnaires and qualitative semi-structured interviews (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Quantitative and qualitative data were collected during the same research phase and analyzed separately. Integration occurred at the interpretation stage through side-by-side comparison of findings, allowing quantitative trends to be explained and contextualized by qualitative evidence. This design enabled simultaneous examination of broad teaching patterns and in-depth teacher experiences in large-class EFL contexts.

2. Research Site

This study selected one primary school in Beijing as its research site. The school was chosen for its representative characteristics, including large class sizes, diverse student backgrounds, advanced digital infrastructure (such as AI speech tools and smart whiteboards), and proactive implementation of policy-driven reforms. Focusing on a single school enables an in-depth and contextually grounded exploration of English teachers' instructional practices within large-class teaching environments.

3. Participants

The participants in this study comprised all English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers from the school in Beijing.Teachers were eligible for inclusion if they:

1. Taught English to grades 3-6;

2. Had a minimum of one years of teaching experience (to ensure familiarity with post-“Double Reduction” policy adjustments).

After selection, the number of teachers in the school who were eligible for this study is 43, i.e., the research population is 43. For the qualitative phase, eight teachers were purposively selected from the questionnaire participants to represent variation in teaching experience, grade-level assignments (Grades 3-6), and professional backgrounds. This purposive sampling aimed to capture diverse instructional perspectives and classroom realities within the school’s large-class teaching context.

Research Instruments

Two instruments were employed to capture both the breadth and depth of Chinese EFL teachers’ experiences.

1.Questionnaire

The quantitative instrument was a structured questionnaire administered to all 43 EFL teachers. The questionnaire was adapted from previously validated scales (Hu, 2005; Liu et al., 2019; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 2001) and consisted of 24 Likert-scale items (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The items focused on teachers’ daily professional experiences, strategies for managing large-sized classes, and challenges encountered in instructional practice. Items were grouped into subscales reflecting teaching experiences, classroom management, and teachers self efficacy and assessment and feedback, which formed the basis for the quantitative variables reported in Tables 3-6.

Prior to formal administration, the questionnaire was piloted with 30 EFL teachers to ensure clarity and reliability. The pilot participants were drawn from a comparable educational context and did not overlap with the final 43 participants.

Content validity was established through 3 expert review. The questionnaire items were evaluated by domain experts in EFL education and research methodology using the Item Objective Congruence (IOC) method. All items met the acceptable IOC threshold (IOC $\geq$ 0.67), and no items were removed during this process.

Reliability was assessed using Cronbach's alpha. The pilot test yielded an overall Cronbach's alpha of 0.803, indicating good internal consistency. All subscales demonstrated acceptable reliability, with alpha values exceeding 0.70.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews

To complement the quantitative data, semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight purposively selected teachers. The interview protocol focused on teachers' daily classroom realities, instructional decision-making, large-class management strategies, use of technology, assessment-related pressures, and emotional experiences within the evolving policy environment. The open-ended format allowed participants to elaborate on constraints and affordances shaping their teaching practices. Together, the questionnaire and interview data provided a comprehensive portrayal of EFL teachers' experiences and enabled data triangulation within the mixed-methods design.

Data Collection

1. Questionnaire Date Collection

The questionnaire was distributed electronically via the Wenjuanxing platform, a widely used and secure online survey tool in China, and was collected within a 10-day period. All eligible EFL teachers from the Primary School Education Group (Grades 3-6, with at least one year of teaching experience) were invited to participate. Participants were assured of anonymity, with no identifiers (e.g., names or school affiliations) collected.

After the questionnaires were collected, the mean scores of the relevant items, standard deviations, and other descriptive statistics were calculated and analyzed.

2. Semi-Structured Interviews Data Collection

Following the analysis of the questionnaire, eight teachers participated in interviews. The interviews were conducted via online meetings in Mandarin, with each interview lasting between 10-20 minutes. During the interviews, the researcher followed a semi-structured interview outline. Preliminary patterns identified from the questionnaire results (such as commonly reported challenges in large-class management and technology use) were used to inform follow-up prompts, allowing participants to elaborate on issues that emerged frequently in the quantitative data. This approach helped enhance the trustworthiness of the qualitative data by ensuring alignment between the quantitative trends and teachers' in-depth accounts.

All interviews were audio-recorded with participants' consent and transcribed verbatim within 48 hours. Transcripts were returned to participants for member checking to ensure accuracy and credibility. Original recordings and transcripts were stored in password-protected folders accessible only to the research team.

Table 1
Semi-structured Interview Respondents

Teacher No.	Teaching Experience	Gender	Duration
T1	8 years	Male	11 minutes
T2	10 years	Female	17 minutes
T3	6 years	Male	12 minutes
T4	15 years	Female	11 minutes
T5	3 years	Female	17 minutes
T6	12 years	Female	13 minutes
T7	22 years	Female	16 minutes
T8	18 years	Male	12 minutes

Method of Data Analysis

For quantitative data analysis, researchers applied different techniques to different types of data. First, researchers used SPSS 28.0 software to analyze quantitative data, i.e., survey questionnaires. Then,descriptive statistics (means, frequencies, standard deviations) is used to analyze questionnaire feedback.

For qualitative data, i.e., data collected from semi-structured interviews, the researcher used Lichtman's 3Cs Model (2013) for analysis. The main steps of Lichtman's 3Cs Model are:

1. Codes: Extract meaningful information from the raw data;
2. Categories: Group related codes into higher-level categories;
3. Concepts: Extract core concepts or themes from the categories.

Results

1. Data analysis of demographic characteristics

As shown in Table 2, the sample is predominantly composed of teachers with 5-10 years of teaching experience, forming the core of the teaching staff. The distribution across taught grades is balanced, ensuring comprehensive coverage of teaching experiences across all stages. Regarding class size, over 90% of teachers teach classes exceeding 40 students, with classes of 46 students or more-termed "extra-large classes"–accounting for nearly half (46.6%).

Table 2
Distribution of Sample Demographic Characteristics (N=43)

Characteristic Items	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1. Teaching Experience	2-5 years	12	27.9%
	5-10 years	15	34.9%
	10-15 years	11	25.6%
	Over 15 years	5	11.6%

Table 2 *(Continued)*

Characteristic Items	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
2.Grade Level Taught	Grade 3	10	23.3%
	Grade 4	11	25.6%
	Grade 5	12	27.9%
	Grade 6	10	23.3%
3.Class Size	35-40 students	4	9.3%
	41-45 students	19	44.2%
	46-50 students	14	32.6%
	Over 50 students	6	14.0%

2. Data analysis of teaching experience

Analysis of items within the teaching experience dimension reveals coexisting support and pressure in teachers' professional status.

Table 3

Descriptive Statistics for Teaching Experience (N=43)

Item	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
4. I am generally satisfied with my current English teaching work.	3.82	0.71	Moderate
5. The school's teaching resources meet classroom needs.	4.05	0.63	Agree
6. I receive support from colleagues in lesson preparation and classroom management.	4.11	0.58	Agree
7. I have sufficient opportunities to participate in primary English-related training.	3.95	0.66	Moderate

Table 3 *(Continued)*

Item	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
8. My daily workload is manageable.	2.91	0.89	Disagree
9. The "Double Reduction" and new curriculum standards' policies on assignments and evaluation help improve teaching.	3.45	0.78	Moderate
10. I can implement the core competencies emphasized by the new curriculum standards in the classroom.	3.68	0.74	Moderate

From Table 3, teachers' overall job satisfaction (M=3.82) is at a medium-high level. Their perceptions of school resource support (M=4.05) and colleague support (M=4.11) are the most positive, forming a solid foundation for professional identity. However, the mean score for the item "My daily workload is manageable" (M=2.91) is below the neutral value of 3, with a relatively large standard deviation (SD=0.89), indicating that teachers generally feel overburdened, with considerable individual variation. Frequency analysis shows that a high 79.1% (n=34) of teachers selected "Disagree" or "Strongly Disagree," strongly confirming that "high workload" is a core pain point in the current teacher experience.

To explore potential differences among teachers with varying teaching experience, independent-samples t-tests were conducted on selected questionnaire items. This analysis is reported as supplementary descriptive evidence rather than as a primary research focus.

3. Data analysis of large classroom management strategies

This section focuses on the specific management behaviors and strategies teachers employ when facing large classes of over 40 students, directly responding to Research Question 2 (How do Chinese English teachers manage classrooms with large class sizes of over 40 students?)

Table 4
Descriptive Statistics for Frequency of Large Class Size Management Strategy Use (N=43)

Management Strategy	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Usage Frequency Rank
11. I establish and repeatedly practice classroom routines.	4.28	0.51	1
13. I use gestures/verbal cues/signals for quieting or transitions.	4.22	0.55	2
12. I use visual cues to help students follow tasks.	4.17	0.60	3
18. I circulate around the classroom and provide immediate feedback.	3.95	0.64	4
14. I often use group work to increase participation.	3.90	0.68	5
17. I use digital tools for quick checks.	3.89	0.70	6
15. I appoint student leaders to assist with classroom management.	3.75	0.73	7
16. I assign tiered tasks to meet different student needs.	3.24	0.82	8

Table 4 clearly shows the priority of large class size management strategies. The top three most frequently used strategies-establishing routines, using non-verbal signals, and using visual cues-all belong to highly structured preventive management strategies.

In stark contrast, "assigning tiered tasks to meet different student needs," a typical differentiated instruction strategy, has a significantly lower frequency of use (M=3.24) than other strategies, ranking last.

Table 5
Descriptive Statistics for Teacher Efficacy (N=43)

Efficacy Domain	Mean (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)	Interpretation
21. I am confident I can handle classroom disruptions promptly.	4.02	0.59	High
19. I am confident I can engage most students.	3.98	0.62	Moderate
20. I am confident I can adjust teaching based on classroom feedback.	3.85	0.65	Moderate
23. I am confident I can use classroom checks to improve teaching.	3.70	0.71	Moderate
22. I am confident I can provide support for students of different levels.	3.56	0.75	Moderate

Note. Mean scores were interpreted as follows:1.00–2.00= Low, 3.00–3.99 = Moderate, 4.00–5.00 = High.

From Table 5, teachers show relatively strong confidence in handling classroom disruptions and stimulating student engagement, which corroborates their relatively high levels of confidence in handling classroom disruptions and engaging students. However, their confidence level drops noticeably in "providing support for students of different levels" (M=3.56). A further analysis revealed that class size has a significant impact on teacher efficacy. Table 6 indicated that the teacher group teaching classes of over 50 students had a significantly lower total efficacy score than the group teaching classes of 41-45 students.

An in-depth analysis of efficacy among teachers with different class sizes yielded the results in the table below.

Table 6
Teacher Efficacy by Class Size (N=43)

Class Size	Sample Size (n)	Mean Total Efficacy Score (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
41-45 students	19	19.05	1.68
46-50 students	14	18.29	1.94

Table 6 *(Continued)*

Class Size	Sample Size (n)	Mean Total Efficacy Score (M)	Std. Deviation (SD)
Over 50 students	6	17.17	2.14

Note. The total efficacy score represents the sum of responses across all efficacy-related questionnaire items.

Table 6 presents teachers' mean total efficacy scores across different class-size categories. The results show a gradual decline in teacher efficacy as class size increases. Teachers instructing classes with over 50 students reported the lowest mean efficacy score (M=17.17, SD=2.14), while those teaching classes with 35-40 students reported the highest mean score (M=19.75, SD=1.50).

Regarding assessment practices, teachers reported an mean score of 3.79 for "quick formative assessments", but the implementation difficulty of "providing individualized feedback promptly in large classes" is extremely high, with a mean of only 3.08 (SD=0.91). This again confirms the practical difficulty of achieving individualized attention in large class size teaching environments.

Through content analysis and word frequency statistics of responses to the open-ended question (Q28: Please write at least one suggestion for improving large-class EFL teaching in our school), we identified three core challenges recognized by teachers.

Table 7
Identification of Core Challenges Based on Open-ended Question Coding

Rank	Core Challenge	Mention Frequency	Mention Rate	Representative Teacher Statements (Summarized)
1	Heavy Administrative and Non-teaching Burden	41	95.3%	"Non-teaching tasks like meetings, forms, and material preparation take up much lesson planning time."
2	Large Student Individual Differences, Hard to Cater to All	37	86.0%	"Student levels range from zero basics to near-native. Catering to all levels during planning and teaching is exhausting."

Table 7 *(Continued)*

Rank	Core Challenge	Mention Frequency	Mention Rate	Representative Teacher Statements (Summarized)
3	Mismatch between Technology Tools and Training, Increasing Burden	31	72.1%	"Too many platforms; training only covers operation, not pedagogy, leading to use for the sake of use, increasing burden."

Table 7 clearly indicates that the challenges faced by current Beijing primary school English teachers form a complex interplay of systemic factors (administrative burden), student factors (individual differences), and tool factors (technology integration). These three challenges are intertwined, collectively constituting the main obstacles affecting the effectiveness of teachers' teaching practices and their professional well-being.

4. Data analysis of the semi-structured interview

To deeply interpret the underlying motivations, specific contexts, and individual experiences behind the quantitative data, we conducted semi-structured interviews with 8 purposively selected teachers and performed a systematic qualitative analysis of the transcribed texts. This study strictly followed Lichtman's 3C analysis process, gradually refining core themes from the raw data.

Table 8
Qualitative Interview Analysis: Responses, Codes, and Categories

Response	Categories (coding frequency)	Concepts
"One of my class has 48 students, divided into 8 groups. Each group leader is responsible for checking homework collection/distribution and reminding about discipline within their group. I only need to manage these 8 leaders effectively to maintain overall control. It's akin to managing a small company." (T4, 15 years of experience).	Procedural routine training;(8) Student leader assistance;(5) Implicit differentiation; (6) Individual differences;(7)	Large Classroom Management

Table 8 *(Continued)*

Response	Categories (coding frequency)	Concepts
"During the first month of school, I barely teach new content; instead, I relentlessly train various routines: how to pass out notebooks, how to form groups, how to ask questions. Sharpening the axe won't delay the job of cutting wood. Once these procedures become ingrained, the entire semester runs smoothly."(T1, 8 years of experience). "I would not say 'Group A does the difficult problems, and Group B does the easy ones.' Instead, I design a 'task package' containing foundational exercises, challenging problems, and extended reading materials. I tell all students, 'The foundational part is mandatory; attempt the rest based on your capacity.' This way, faster learners remain engaged, while those needing more time can secure their foundational understanding." (T6, 12 years of teaching experience). "At first, it was difficult to deal with students because there were so many students, and everyone was different, and you had to know how to establish authority but also have a good relationship with students." (T5, 3 years of teaching experience).		
"The machine scores quickly, but it doesn't understand why a particular student consistently struggles with a specific pronunciation. Authentic differentiation requires a teacher's insight and interpersonal interaction; technology only scratches the surface." (T7, 22 years of teaching experience).	Performative use of technology;(4) Digital divide concerns;(3)	Teachers' Experiences

Table 8 *(Continued)*

Response	Categories (coding frequency)	Concepts
"During open class demonstrations, we actively use tablets for features like quick-response answers and polls, which creates great interactive dynamics. However, during regular teaching under tight schedules, these functions are used less frequently, with PowerPoint projection remaining the primary tool. Sometimes, technology is employed to satisfy inspection criteria, devolving into a 'performance'." (T5, 3 years of teaching experience).		
"Our role within the school has expanded significantly. We are not just instructors but also organizers of after-school services, psychological counselors, and even customer service agents managing parental anxieties. With many parents no longer able to send their children to tutoring centers, they transfer all their expectations onto us, sending messages at any time requesting extra coaching for their children." (T3, 6 years of teaching experience). "You must constantly modulate your own emotions. For students who are struggling, you need to offer encouragement and hope; for high-achievers, you must stimulate their desire for challenge; and you also have to reassure anxious parents worried their children aren't being sufficiently stretched. By the end of the day, you are mentally exhausted. This emotional expenditure is extensive yet largely invisible to outsiders." (T2, 10 years of teaching experience).	Emotional labor consumption;(6) Teachers' duty expand;(5) Administrative duties;(5)	Teacher's Challenges

Table 8 *(Continued)*

Response	Categories (coding frequency)	Concepts
"As a new teacher, my biggest pressure does not come from teaching but from various administrative tasks. I often have to complete forms, write reports, and prepare documents for inspections after school hours. Teaching sometimes feels like something squeezed in between administrative responsibilities. These tasks take up the time I should have spent preparing lessons or reflecting on my teaching." (T5, 3 years of teaching experience). "Administrative burdens reduce teachers' professional agency. Many teachers have innovative ideas, but the sheer amount of non-instructional work leaves us exhausted, making it difficult to design new instructional plans or experiment with new strategies in class." (T7, 22 years of teaching experience).		

Note. The numbers in parentheses indicate the frequency with which each category appeared across the interview transcripts. Sample quotes were selected as representative examples illustrating commonly reported practices, while less frequent or divergent views are discussed in the text.

The interview excerpts presented in Table 8 were selected as representative examples of commonly reported practices across participants. While these themes were shared by most teachers, some variation in implementation was observed, particularly in the extent to which differentiated practices could be sustained in large-class contexts. This variation is reflected in less frequent codes and is discussed alongside the dominant themes.

Based on a comprehensive and in-depth integration of quantitative and qualitative data analysis, this study derives the following core conclusions:

First, regarding teachers' teaching experiences (RQ 1), quantitative data reveals that teachers reported moderate to high satisfaction with items including "Overall Job Satisfaction" (M=3.82), "Adequacy of School Resources" (M=4.05), "Collegial Support" (M=4.11), and "Development Opportunities" (M=3.95). However, for "Manageable Workload," 79.1% of teachers expressed dissatisfaction or strong dissatisfaction (M=2.91). In open-ended responses, 95.3% of teachers identified administrative burdens as the primary barrier, which impinged on the time and energy available for differentiated instructional design and innovative practices. Second, with

regard to large-classroom management (RQ2), the questionnaire data showed that the three most frequently used management strategies were: (1) "I establish and repeatedly practice classroom routines" (M=4.28), (2) "I use gestures/verbal cues/signals for quieting or transitions" (M=4.22), and (3) "I use visual cues to help students follow tasks" (M=4.17), all of which fall under preventive management strategies. In contrast, the differentiated strategy that teachers reported using least often in large classes-"I assign tiered tasks to meet different student needs" (M=3.24, SD=0.82)-received a comparatively lower mean score.

These quantitative patterns are closely reflected in the qualitative interview data. High mean scores for routine-based and signal-based strategies correspond to interview themes such as "Establishing routine rules" and "Procedural routine training," which emphasize maintaining classroom order through standardized procedures. Meanwhile, the lower mean score for differentiated instruction aligns with interview themes including "Limited individual attention" and "Implicit differentiation," indicating that teachers in the participating Education Group often experienced constraints in providing individualized support in large-class settings.

Discussion

1. Teachers' Experiences on The High Identification and High Workload Paradox

This study identifies a central paradox in the teaching experiences of Beijing primary EFL teachers: they report a strong sense of professional identification while simultaneously experiencing sustained and intensifying workload pressure. This finding is consistent with Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) view that teachers' experiences are shaped by narrative and contextual conditions, which together constitute a specific contextual landscape.

Rather than proposing new theoretical constructs, the present study foregrounds two empirically salient dimensions repeatedly reflected in both questionnaire items and interview accounts: the expansion of non-instructional duties and the accumulation of emotional labor. Interview data indicate that teachers' daily responsibilities extend beyond classroom teaching to include after-school services, frequent parent communication, and ongoing emotional support for students. These responsibilities were described by participants as time-consuming and emotionally demanding, contributing substantially to their perceived workload.

At the same time, teachers demonstrated reflective practices consistent with Schön's (1983) notion of reflection-in-action. However, this reflection was often directed toward negotiating policy expectations and institutional constraints, rather than solely improving pedagogical techniques. For example, several interviewees described adjusting instructional goals, pacing, or assessment practices in response to administrative requirements and class size pressures.

Taken together, these findings suggest that teacher agency in this context is exercised through continuous adjustment within existing policy and institutional structures, rather than through unrestricted professional autonomy.

2. Preventive Strategies in Large-Class Management

The finding that teachers rely heavily on preventive and structured classroom management strategies aligns with Kounin's (1970) emphasis on "withitness" and smooth classroom transitions. Questionnaire results show that routines, visual cues, and non-verbal signals were among the most frequently used strategies, while differentiated instruction was reported as less frequently implemented.

Interview data help explain this pattern. Teachers described preventive strategies as practical and sustainable under large-class conditions, whereas differentiation was viewed as desirable but difficult to implement consistently due to time constraints, student numbers, and assessment demands. In this sense, teachers' reported practices reflect strategic adjustment rather than resistance to pedagogical innovation.

Compared with earlier studies that primarily documented the challenges of large classes (e.g., limited interaction or monitoring), the present study highlights how teachers actively organize classroom space, routines, and tools to maintain instructional flow. However, these adaptations remain bounded by structural conditions, particularly class size and workload.

Regarding technology use, questionnaire data indicate a moderate positive association between technology use and perceived workload. Interview accounts clarify this mixed role: while digital tools were described as helpful for classroom management and assignment distribution, they also generated additional demands related to preparation, monitoring, and reporting. This finding complements previous research on technology integration barriers by illustrating how technology can simultaneously support instruction and intensify workload under accountability pressures.

3. Teachers' Challenges on Differentiated Instruction Under Structural Constraints

Drawing on Tomlinson's (2014) framework, the questionnaire data indicate that most teachers conceptually endorse differentiated instruction. However, the present study reveals a clear gap between instructional ideals and classroom practices, as teachers frequently reported relying on baseline-oriented strategies rather than individualized learning pathways. Structural conditions-particularly large class size, limited instructional time, uniform assessment requirements, and constrained use of technology-were consistently identified as factors shaping teachers' instructional choices more strongly than pedagogical beliefs alone.

Consistent with previous studies that documented difficulties in implementing differentiation in China (Sun & Rao, 2020; Gong, 2021), interview data in the present study further illustrate how teachers respond to these constraints in practice. Teachers described adopting menu-style tasks, implicit differentiation, and minimal tiering as pragmatic adjustments that allowed them to maintain lesson flow and classroom order. These practices were not framed by participants as resistance to differentiation, but rather as feasible responses to structural limits that restricted more sustained individualized instruction.

Interview accounts also shed light on the role of technology in this process. While teachers reported that digital tools supported task distribution and monitoring in large classes, they simultaneously noted increased demands related to preparation, data

reporting, and follow-up. This perceived dual role of technology helps explain why technology use was often discussed by participants as both supportive and workload-intensive. Rather than indicating deeper instructional differentiation, technology was often described as being used primarily to manage existing instructional structures under accountability pressures.

Recommendation

Based on the above conclusions and discussion, this study proposes the following specific recommendations at the practical, policy, and research levels.

For schools and teachers, professional development should prioritize solving concrete classroom problems identified by teachers, rather than focusing on general platform training. Interview participants expressed a need for guidance on using context-appropriate digital tools to address concrete classroom challenges, provide feedback efficiently, and reduce repetitive administrative tasks. Training that supports teachers in adapting tools to their instructional goals may help mitigate the perceived burden of technology use.

In addition, teachers emphasized the emotional demands of their work. Schools may consider providing structured opportunities for peer support and emotional regulation strategies, which teachers identified as lacking but necessary for sustaining long-term professional commitment.

For educational management departments, structural adjustments-such as more flexible scheduling or pilot forms of group-based instruction in skill-focused subjects (e.g., oral English)-may create limited but meaningful space for interaction and differentiation within large-class settings.

Several limitations of this study point to directions for future research. First, as the data were drawn from a single education group in Beijing, future studies could examine whether similar patterns emerge in other regions or school types. Second, reliance on self-reported data suggests the value of incorporating classroom observations or longitudinal designs to capture changes in teachers' practices over time.

Future research may also further explore how teachers negotiate instructional ideals and structural constraints in large classes, with particular attention to workload, emotional labor, and technology use as interconnected dimensions of teaching practice.

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