

Resonating Voices: Unpacking EFL Teachers' Beliefs Regarding Pronunciation Instruction in Chinese Tertiary Context

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Abstract

This study investigates the beliefs of three English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers regarding pronunciation instruction at a university in Northwest China, focusing on an area that remains under-explored in Chinese contexts. Data was collected using semi-structured interviews and narratives. The findings demonstrated that, despite recognizing the significance of pronunciation in language learning, the teachers' approach to pronunciation instruction was often unsystematic and reactive, primarily addressing segmental errors through corrective feedback. In addition, the teachers' trajectories of pronunciation beliefs were shaped by several factors, including their own educational backgrounds, the constraints of the curriculum, the perceived needs of their students. Furthermore, insufficient professional development opportunities led to the undervaluation of pronunciation in their teaching practices. These findings underscore the necessity for tailored teacher education programs that provide a range of effective strategies for pronunciation teaching. By offering systematic and comprehensive training, such programs could help close the gap between teachers' beliefs and practices, thereby enhancing the overall quality of pronunciation instruction in EFL classrooms.

Keywords: teachers' beliefs, pronunciation instruction, Chinese tertiary context

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, research in teacher education has increasingly focused on teachers as decision-makers whose instructional methods are shaped by their cognitive frameworks (Borg, 2015, 2019; Li, 2020). This shift in focus has highlighted the significant impact of teachers' beliefs on their classroom practices and pedagogical reasoning (Asghari et al., 2021; Tajeddin & Soleimani, 2022). Despite extensive research on language teachers' beliefs and their influence on classroom practices (Ghavamnia, 2020; Yu et al., 2020), there is a noticeable gap in understanding how non-native English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers, particularly in China, perceive pronunciation instruction.

Pronunciation instruction is critical for effective language learning and teaching, impacting learners' communication skills and the perceptions of their proficiency (Kochem, 2022; Uchida & Sugimoto, 2020). However, L2 pronunciation is often neglected in teacher training programs, leading to inadequate classroom instruction (Tsunemoto et al., 2023; Derwing, 2019). In China, these issues are compounded by a lack of specific training and resources, which undermines teachers' confidence and affects the quality of pronunciation instruction.

Furthermore, Chinese learners of English face significant pronunciation challenges due to differences between the Chinese and English phonological systems (Li, 2020; Wang & Wen, 2023). Learners often substitute unfamiliar sounds with similar ones from their native language (Duyen, 2024), such as replacing /ə/ with /s/ and /ð/ with /d/ or /z/ (Xuan, 2019) and shortening diphthongs like /ei/ to /e/ (Wu & Wang, 2020). Suprasegmental features like intonation and rhythm also pose challenges due to the languages' distinct sound structures (Calet et al., 2015). These phonological challenges underscore the need for pronunciation instruction that enhances intelligibility.

Despite the recognized importance of pronunciation, most studies have focused on public institutions, where teachers often have better access to resources and professional development (e.g., Gordon, 2023; Haryadi & Aprianoto, 2020; Nguyen & Newton, 2020). In contrast, private university teachers, who face unique challenges such as students' low

proficiency and larger class sizes, have received less attention (Islam & Stapa, 2021; Soleimani & Razmjoo, 2016). This study addresses this gap by exploring the beliefs and practices of EFL teachers at a private university in Xi'an, China. It aims to uncover their beliefs regarding pronunciation instruction and the factors influencing these beliefs within the higher education context. The following research questions guide this investigation:

Research Question 1: What are the beliefs of Chinese university EFL teachers regarding pronunciation instruction?

Research Question 2: How are the teachers' trajectories of pronunciation beliefs shaped?

2. Literature Review

2.1 Teachers' Beliefs

Teacher beliefs, encompassing opinions and ideas about language learning and teaching, significantly influence their decision-making processes and instructional approaches (Borg, 2019). To comprehensively understand the impact of teachers' beliefs on instructional practices, it is essential to categorize these beliefs into core areas. Lan and Lam (2020) have identified five key categories that encapsulate the fundamental beliefs held by EFL teachers, providing a comprehensive framework for understanding their perspectives, as shown in Figure 1.

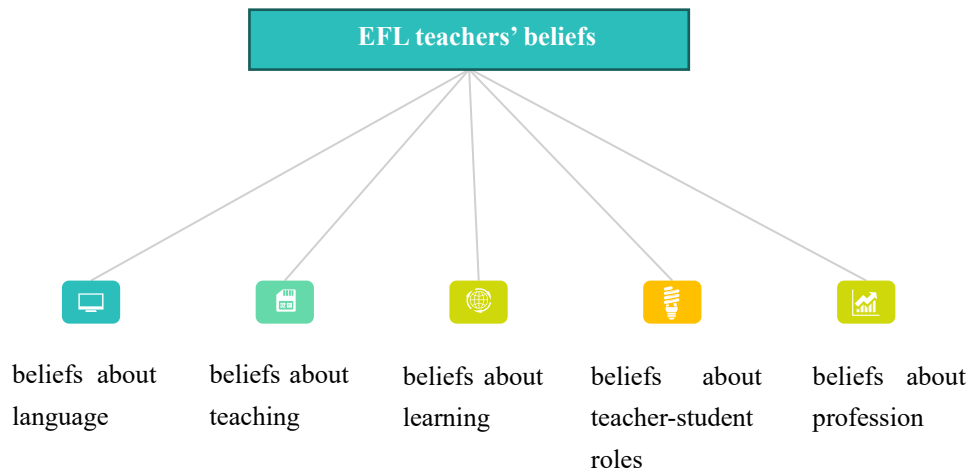


Figure 1. Five Categories of Teachers' Beliefs (Lan & Lam, 2020)

Figure 1 depicts five interconnected categories that define the broader construct of “beliefs” in EFL teaching: beliefs about the English language, teaching, learning, the roles of teachers and students, and the profession. These categories, while distinct, collectively shape teachers' professional attitudes and practices.

(1) Beliefs about the English Language: Teachers' perceptions of English, whether as a standardized language or a collection of dialects, significantly influence their teaching. Those emphasizing standard English focus on clear communication (Flöck, 2016), while those valuing diversity encourage inclusive teaching practices (Matsuda, 2017).

(2) Beliefs about Teaching: Teachers who see teaching as facilitating learning often use communicative approaches (Richards, 2015). In contrast, those who view teaching as content delivery might adopt traditional, teacher-centred methods (Pajares, 1992).

(3) Beliefs about Learning: Teachers' personal learning experiences shape their teaching methods. Interactive learners may favour communicative strategies, while those with structured learning backgrounds might prefer formal instruction (Horwitz, 2020).

(4) Beliefs about the Roles of Teachers and Students: The perceived roles of teachers and students influence classroom dynamics. Teachers who view themselves as facilitators encourage autonomy and active participation (Littlewood, 2013), whereas those who prefer direct instruction often maintain a more hierarchical classroom (Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015).

(5) Beliefs about the Profession: Teachers' perceptions of their profession influence their commitment to professional development and ethical standards. Those viewing teaching as a noble profession prioritize continuous learning and integrity (Farrell, 2022; Friedman, 2023).

Despite these well-defined categories, inconsistencies often exist between teachers' beliefs and practices, influenced by personal and contextual factors. For example, Wang et al. (2020) noted a gap between beliefs about assessment and actual practices due to factors like student attitudes and school culture. Similarly, Yüksel et al. (2021) found classroom management issues complicate the relationship between beliefs and practices in feedback. Teacher education programs can sometimes reshape beliefs and practices, particularly when tailored to teachers' needs, as shown by Van Ha and Murray (2021) and Nazari and Xodabande (2022). These findings suggest that aligning beliefs with practices is more nuanced and context-dependent than previously understood.

2.2 Research on Teachers' Beliefs about Pronunciation

Research into teachers' beliefs regarding various language skills, such as listening, grammar, vocabulary, and writing, has been well-documented (e.g., Emerick, 2019; Bergström et al., 2022). However, studies focused on teachers' beliefs about pronunciation remain relatively sparse, despite the critical role pronunciation plays in mutual intelligibility in oral communication (Nguyen et al., 2021; Bai & Yuan, 2019). This scarcity of research underscores the need for a more thorough examination of this essential area.

Some studies have provided valuable insights into the challenges of pronunciation instruction in EFL contexts. Bai and Yuan (2019) identify a significant gap between non-native English teachers' beliefs and their practices, citing external factors such as inadequate training and low self-confidence as barriers to effective pronunciation teaching. Their study emphasizes the role of personal and contextual constraints that prevent teachers from aligning their practices with their beliefs. In contrast, Nguyen and Newton (2020) observe that pronunciation instruction often occurs spontaneously as corrective feedback rather than being part of a structured curriculum. This finding suggests that pronunciation teaching is often reactive and inconsistent, depending on immediate classroom needs. While both studies reveal challenges in pronunciation instruction, Bai and Yuan focus on personal barriers, whereas Nguyen and Newton emphasize curricular inconsistencies.

Further comparisons between Georgiou (2019) and Tsunemoto and Trofimovich (2023) highlight different influences on teachers' beliefs. Georgiou (2019) notes generational differences, with younger teachers placing less emphasis on pronunciation than their older counterparts. However, the study does not explore the reasons behind these differences or how to address them. Tsunemoto and Trofimovich (2023) examine the role of teaching experience, finding that in-service teachers have more robust beliefs about pronunciation than pre-service teachers. Both studies underscore the importance of targeted professional development to address these variations, focusing on generational and experiential differences.

Despite the relative scarcity of research in this area, these studies collectively highlight the importance of exploring language teachers' beliefs about pronunciation. However, as beliefs are increasingly recognized as complex systems (Zheng, 2015), further research is needed to investigate other contextual and personal factors influencing teachers' beliefs and practices. Such studies should adopt a more comprehensive conceptual framework that captures the intricate interplay of these factors, offering a more nuanced understanding of how teachers' beliefs and practices are shaped and reshaped within the evolving dynamics of the classroom. This approach is crucial for informing the design of pronunciation instruction courses that are responsive to teachers' beliefs and the realities of their teaching contexts.

2.3 Framework of This Study

The framework for this study (see Figure 2 below) is grounded in Borg's model of teacher cognition research (2015). In this framework, teachers' beliefs occupy a central position, shaped by their experiences as learners, their professional training, and the specific teaching contexts they operate within. Teachers' beliefs about pronunciation teaching may evolve with professional development and exposure to new pedagogical approaches. However, situational constraints like mandated curricula and time pressures may limit the extent to which these beliefs are enacted (Basturkmen, 2012; Phipps & Borg, 2009). Borg's model thus provides a basis for understanding how EFL teachers' beliefs about pronunciation instruction are shaped by their learning experiences, professional training, and the unique educational context of Chinese private universities.

This study aims to uncover teachers' beliefs regarding pronunciation instruction and how these beliefs are shaped within the context of Chinese private universities. The insights gained from this study are not only critical for improving teaching strategies and learner outcomes within the Chinese context but also offer valuable contributions to the broader field of EFL education globally.

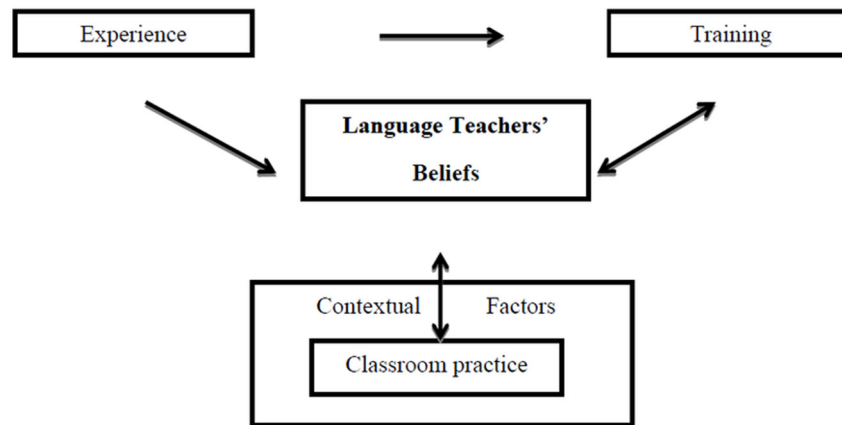


Figure 2. The Modified Framework of Language Teacher Cognition (Borg, 2015)

3. Method

A case study was employed to investigate the beliefs of three Chinese EFL teachers regarding pronunciation instruction and the factors shaping these beliefs. This qualitative method allows for an in-depth exploration of individual perspectives within specific teaching contexts, which are often complex and nuanced. As Creswell and Guetterman (2019) note, case studies are particularly effective for understanding context-bound phenomena, making this approach ideal for examining EFL teachers' beliefs about pronunciation instruction within the unique cultural and institutional settings of a private university in China.

3.1 Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at a private university in Xi'an city, China, recognized for its rigorous English language programs and strong academic reputation in the region (Li et al., 2019). College English courses, mandatory for all non-English major students, are central to the university's curriculum. These courses are primarily assessed through the College English Test (CET), a high-stakes national examination that significantly influences both the instructional content and pedagogical strategies employed by instructors. The predominant teaching approach in these courses is teacher-centred, with a focus on grammar, translation, and reading comprehension (Gan, 2013). At the university, the English proficiency levels of non-English majors range from pre-intermediate to intermediate, and class sizes average 30 students. College English courses are taught twice a week, each session lasting 90 minutes, across a 16-week semester. The curriculum encompasses vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, and translation components aimed at enhancing students' overall English language proficiency.

Participants for this study were selected through purposeful sampling to ensure the inclusion of information-rich cases (Miles et al., 2020). Three Chinese EFL teachers were purposively selected for this study based on their extensive teaching experience (exceeding ten years) in College English courses and their academic qualifications in English language or education-related fields. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) suggest, small samples allow for a deeper understanding of the nuanced experiences and beliefs of participants, which is critical in capturing the richness of individual teachers' perspectives. Additionally, the study aimed to explore the trajectories of teachers' beliefs in a focused context, making it appropriate to prioritize depth of insight over breadth of sample.

Table 1 demonstrates the profiles for the three participants. To maintain confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned to the teachers: Mary, Linda, and Sara. All participants possess master's degrees in relevant fields, such as English Language, Education, or Literature, and their teaching experience ranges from 11 to 18 years. Their professional background and familiarity with student needs make them well-positioned to offer valuable insights into pronunciation instruction in Chinese higher education settings.

Table 1. Case Study Teachers' Profiles

Teacher's name (pseudonym)	Gender	Education (b-bachelor's, d-doctorate)	background m-master's,	Teaching experience	Overseas experience	Education/Training related to English pronunciation
Mary	Female	English (b) Applied linguistics (m)		11 years	Yes (4 years)	No formal training
Linda	Female	English (b) American Literature (m)		15 years	No	Formal training
Sara	Female	English (b) English Education (m)		18 years	No	No formal training

3.2 Data Source

Before the study, informed consent forms were obtained from the three teachers, followed by in-depth semi-structured interviews to investigate their beliefs about pronunciation instruction. Semi-structured interviews are widely recognized as an effective method for investigating complex, context-dependent phenomena such as teacher beliefs (Tergujeff, 2012; Costa, 2016). This method is particularly suitable for uncovering teachers' implicit beliefs about pronunciation teaching, which are shaped by personal experiences, contextual factors, and cultural influences (Borg, 2015). Conducted at the beginning of the 2023-2024 academic year, each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. The interview questions (see Appendix) were developed based on established frameworks by Baker (2011) and Aldayel (2018), which were chosen for their relevance to the context of EFL teaching. The interview questions were divided into five categories (see Table 2) in line with Lan and Lam's (2020) study. The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility, encouraging teachers to express their beliefs in a reflective manner and facilitating the emergence of additional insights.

Table 2. Categories of Beliefs About Pronunciation Instruction

Subset	Item number
Section 1: Beliefs about language	1, 2
Section 2: Beliefs about teaching	3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 9, 10, 11, 12
Section 3: Beliefs about learning	13,14, 15
Section 4: Beliefs about teacher-student roles	16, 17, 18
Section 5: Beliefs about profession	19, 20, 21, 22

Table 2 presents the categories of beliefs about pronunciation instruction explored in this study. These categories were selected based on their relevance to understanding the multi-dimensional nature of teachers' beliefs, covering essential aspects of language teaching, learning, teacher-student roles, and professional development. The first two questions addressed general EFL teaching, followed by questions on L2 pronunciation teaching (3-12), L2 pronunciation learning (13-15), teacher-student roles (16-18), and professional development (19-22). This structure ensured a smooth transition from general to specific topics, allowing participants to express their beliefs in a comfortable and reflective manner. In addition to the semi-structured interviews, teachers were also asked to narrate how various factors influenced the development of their beliefs about pronunciation instruction.

3.3 Data Analysis

The analysis involved a systematic process of transcription, translation, coding, and thematic analysis. Each step was carefully designed to maintain the integrity and depth of the original data. The semi-structured interviews were conducted in Chinese to ensure participants could articulate their beliefs and experiences without language barriers. Temple and Young (2004) argue that native-language interviews allow participants to focus on content rather than translation, minimizing cognitive overload. To ensure the validity of the data, interviews were transcribed in Chinese and translated into English by a certified translator, followed by cross-verification for semantic consistency.

The thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. Initially, the transcripts were thoroughly examined to generate primary codes such as *accent*, *training*, and *confidence issues*. Subsequently, codes

with similar concepts were grouped into corresponding sub-themes. For example, codes like *native-like accent*, *British accent*, and *American accent* were classified under the sub-theme of *nativeness*, while those labelled as *vocabulary knowledge* and *listening skills* were combined into the sub-theme of *communicative competence*. After all codes were assigned to their appropriate sub-themes, those referring to related concepts were merged to form major themes. For example, codes pertaining to *learners' preferences*, *expectations*, and *attitudes* were consolidated into the theme of *beliefs about learners' needs*. The findings were continuously reviewed to identify factors contributing to the formation of participants' beliefs. Lastly, the data were analysed through the lens of Teacher Cognition Theory, utilizing schooling, professional development, classroom teaching practice, and contextual factors as analytical templates to deepen the understanding of how these elements contribute to the formation and evolution of teachers' beliefs about pronunciation instruction.

4. Results

This qualitative study aimed to examine EFL teachers' beliefs about pronunciation teaching in Chinese tertiary classrooms. Through thematic analysis of in-depth interviews, five key themes emerged, reflecting the complex and multifaceted nature of teachers' beliefs. Additionally, common factors were identified as shaping the evolution of these beliefs.

4.1 Teachers' Beliefs about Pronunciation Instruction

The first research question sought to uncover EFL teachers' beliefs about pronunciation instruction. The analysis of interviews with Mary, Linda, and Sara revealed five central themes (see Table 3): teachers' views on the importance of pronunciation, their methods, priorities, and goals in pronunciation instruction, their personal learning experiences and competencies, their perceptions of their roles and students' needs, and their beliefs about the need for professional development.

Table 3. Summary of Key Themes

Theme	Key insights
1. Teachers' views on importance of pronunciation	Teachers believed that pronunciation played a crucial role in language learning, affecting communication, confidence, and language proficiency.
2. Teachers' methods, priorities and goals in pronunciation instruction	Teachers adopted different methods for pronunciation instruction but prioritized intelligibility over achieving a native-like accent.
3. Teachers' own learning experiences and competencies	Teachers' prior learning experiences and competencies influenced their current approaches in pronunciation teaching, with varying levels of emphasis on native-like accents.
4. Teachers' roles and perceptions of learners' needs	Teachers perceived pronunciation as essential for low-proficiency students but often deprioritized it in favour of exam preparation.
5. Teachers' desire for training and professional development	Teachers expressed a desire for targeted professional development to enhance their ability to teach pronunciation effectively.

4.1.1 Teachers' Views on Importance of Pronunciation

This theme represents teachers' beliefs regarding the role of pronunciation in language learning. It encompasses their perceptions of how pronunciation affects communication, learner confidence, and overall language proficiency. All three teachers emphasized the significance of pronunciation, although they highlighted different benefits. Mary argued, "*when students do listening tests or something, most of the words they can't hear are because they don't pronounce them correctly,*" suggesting that poor pronunciation hinders listening comprehension. Sara linked pronunciation closely with speaking skills, noting that "*students don't want to speak English because their pronunciation is not standard enough,*" implying that mispronunciation can create communication barriers and reduce students' willingness to speak. Linda pointed out that pronunciation aids vocabulary retention: "*coding words based on their sound patterns can make it easier for students to remember them.*" She further noted that strong pronunciation skills boost students' confidence and encourage class participation. Collectively, the teachers highlighted the positive impact of pronunciation on communication, confidence, and vocabulary retention.

4.1.2 Teachers' Methods, Priorities and Goals in Pronunciation Instruction

This theme embodies the methods, techniques, and priorities teachers use in teaching pronunciation. While all three teachers integrated pronunciation with other language skills, none employed a systematic approach. Mary favoured repetition drills to help students internalize new vocabulary, Linda provided feedback during speaking activities, and Sara used multimedia resources to expose students to English sounds. However, pronunciation was typically addressed reactively, only when errors arose, rather than through explicit, planned instruction.

As for teaching priorities, both Mary and Linda focused on segmental features like vowels and consonants, citing their importance for intelligibility. Sara, echoing this sentiment, stated that *“these elements (vowels and consonants) are more related to achieving intelligibility in communication.”* Regarding the goals in pronunciation teaching, all three teachers prioritized intelligibility over achieving a native-like accent. Mary said, *“I don't expect students to sound like native speakers, and my main goal is to help my students achieve clear and understandable pronunciation.”* Similarly, Linda mentioned that *“it's more important for students to be understood by others than to sound like native speakers.”* Sara justified herself by stating *“our students have been exposed to English for less than ten years, and I don't want my students to feel discouraged by trying to achieve a native-like accent.”* It is evident that they all emphasized clear and understandable pronunciation as their primary goal.

4.1.3 Teachers' Learning Experiences and Competencies

This theme deals with the influence of teachers' own learning experiences and the skills they have developed over time on their current teaching practices. Sara emphasized the importance of teachers having a native-like accent, formed by her experience with a teacher with a great British accent. Nonetheless, she recalled minimal exposure to pronunciation lessons during her schooling. In a similar vein, Mary initially believed in a native-like accent, especially British English, and always asked students to listen to and repeat the files she shared. However, she changed her mind after struggling with pronunciation herself. She said, *“I found it really difficult to speak like native speakers...but my classmates could communicate very well despite their weak accents.”* Linda, with minimal emphasis on pronunciation in her schooling, initially disregarded its importance in teaching. Overall, these varying experiences led to different beliefs about the role of a native-like accent in language proficiency. Teachers' exposure to pronunciation instruction, both as students and as teachers, significantly shaped their competencies and confidence in teaching pronunciation.

4.1.4 Teachers' Roles and Perceptions of Learners' Needs

This theme relates to teachers' perceptions of their roles in pronunciation instruction and their understanding of students' needs. Teachers agreed that pronunciation is crucial for low-proficiency students, as it forms a foundation for language learning. Linda endorsed a supportive role in creating a collaborative learning environment. However, due to the exam-oriented education system, pronunciation often received less attention compared to grammar and vocabulary. Mary and Sara viewed pronunciation as a secondary focus, perceiving their roles as facilitators who address students' immediate needs. As Sara explained, *“Pronunciation isn't always taught explicitly because students need to focus on grammar and vocabulary for exams.”* This pragmatic approach underscores how external factors, such as the exam-driven educational system, shape teachers' views on the relative importance of pronunciation.

4.1.5 Teachers' Desire for Training and Professional Development

This theme represents teachers' beliefs about the benefits of ongoing training and professional development in enhancing their pronunciation teaching. All three teachers expressed dissatisfaction with their training, citing a lack of focus on pronunciation pedagogy. Mary suggested, *“Training programs should include one course specifically focused on pronunciation pedagogy to help develop expertise.”* Linda stressed the need for continuous professional learning to stay updated on best practices. Sara, who actively sought out professional development opportunities, stated, *“I seek opportunities to deepen my understanding of pronunciation instruction and explore innovative methods.”* Collectively, these teachers highlighted the need for targeted professional development to improve their effectiveness in teaching pronunciation.

4.2 Trajectories of Teachers' Beliefs about Pronunciation Instruction

The second research question aimed to explore the evolution of teachers' beliefs about pronunciation instruction. The trajectories of Mary, Linda, and Sara illustrate how their beliefs have developed over time, shaped by personal schooling experiences, the constraints of the Chinese exam-oriented education system, and the diverse needs of their students.

4.2.1 Trajectory of Mary's Pronunciation Beliefs

Mary's beliefs about pronunciation have undergone significant evolution, influenced by her early education, teaching experiences, and role as an examiner. Initially, her understanding of pronunciation was shaped by a traditional focus on the phonetic alphabet, a method she later found impractical. She recalled, "*Pronunciation in my school was more about memorizing the phonetic alphabet, which wasn't practical. I rarely use it in my teaching now.*" Early in her teaching career, Mary adopted a reactive approach to pronunciation correction, addressing errors in passing without further explanation. However, over time, Mary's beliefs shifted as she reflected on her own experiences and observed her students' struggles. A pivotal moment in her belief development occurred when she realized that a native-like accent was not essential for effective communication.

Mary's role as an examiner for standardized exams further shaped her belief system. "*We always look at grammar drills, comprehension, and writing, and communication skills are emphasized only because of the oral exams,*" she explained. Her exposure to the exam-focused system made her question the value of extensive pronunciation instruction. In turn, her teaching practices evolved to prioritize fluency and communication over perfect pronunciation. This shift was especially influenced by her realization that many students struggled with other language components, such as grammar, and were overwhelmed by the demands of exam preparation. As a result, Mary began to view pronunciation as secondary, focusing instead on helping students communicate effectively and understandably.

4.2.2 Trajectory of Linda's Pronunciation Beliefs

Linda's beliefs about pronunciation evolved from an initial admiration for native-like accents to a more pragmatic approach shaped by her teaching context and students' needs. As a student, Linda was motivated to emulate the British accent of her teacher, believing it to be a marker of language proficiency. However, she soon became frustrated with her own struggles in mastering pronunciation, which led her to question the practicality of such a focus. Reflecting on her own experiences, she said, "*I got tired of repeating words...I didn't know the stress of all words and got tired of looking them up in my dictionary.*" Despite these challenges, Linda continued to value pronunciation but recognized the limitations of focusing on it in a classroom setting, particularly within the constraints of the Chinese educational system.

Linda's schooling experience, which de-emphasized pronunciation in favour of grammar and vocabulary, significantly impacted her approach to teaching. "*During my schooling years, pronunciation was not emphasized at all,*" she recalled. This lack of focus on pronunciation in her own education led her to prioritize grammar and vocabulary in her teaching. Linda admitted that when students mispronounced words, she would simply correct the error without elaborating on the phonetic rules, such as the silent "s" in "island". Her approach was further reinforced by the exam-driven education system, which placed more emphasis on reading comprehension and grammar than on pronunciation. As Linda continued teaching, her belief in the secondary role of pronunciation persisted. "*Pronunciation gets only incidental attention,*" she noted, underscoring her shift towards prioritizing exam-related content over phonetic accuracy.

4.2.3 Trajectory of Sara's Pronunciation Beliefs

Sara's beliefs about pronunciation evolved from a minimal focus on phonetics to an emphasis on intelligibility, influenced by both her own educational background and professional training. Early in her teaching career, Sara focused more on communicative tasks and speaking activities than on explicit pronunciation instruction. Reflecting on her early experiences, she explained, "*Pronunciation was overshadowed by grammar drills and other skills. I think that's why I focus more on speaking tasks than phonetics in my teaching now.*" This focus on communicative tasks reflected the educational philosophy she encountered during her own schooling, where pronunciation was not a primary concern.

Sara's beliefs began to shift after attending a teacher training program, which introduced her to the concept of intelligibility—the idea that helping students to be understood was more important than achieving native-like pronunciation. "*My teacher educator pointed out that non-native speakers use English to communicate with other people, and if you, as teachers, help them make themselves understood, you accomplish your mission,*" she recalled. This realization led Sara to prioritize intelligibility in her teaching, focusing on helping students communicate effectively rather than obsessing over phonetic accuracy. However, Sara also acknowledged the challenges posed by her students' limited proficiency levels. "*Many of my students struggle with basic grammar and vocabulary. Diving into technical phonetic details would confuse them even more,*" she said. This recognition led her to correct pronunciation errors without delving into phonetic intricacies. Despite her reduced focus on phonetics, Sara

creatively integrated pronunciation into her lessons using materials like audio recordings and movie clips to help students improve their communicative skills.

4.2.4 Shared Influences and Challenges

While each teacher's journey reflects unique experiences, several common factors emerged in shaping their belief trajectories. These include their formative schooling experiences, the constraints of the exam-oriented system, and their students' needs (see Table 4).

Table 4. Common Influences on Trajectories of Teachers' Beliefs

Influencing factors	Impact on beliefs
Educational background	Limited focus on pronunciation
Exam-oriented system	Prioritization of grammar and vocabulary
Student needs	Focus on intelligibility and effective communication

All three teachers initially undervalued pronunciation, a perspective shaped by their own educational experiences, where pronunciation was either de-emphasized or seen as secondary to other language skills. As they gained teaching experience, each teacher recognized the challenges of balancing pronunciation instruction with the more immediate needs of grammar and vocabulary, particularly in the context of exam preparation. The Chinese exam-oriented education system played a significant role in shaping their beliefs, reinforcing the perception that pronunciation was less important than other skills that were directly assessed. However, all three teachers eventually adopted a more communicative approach, emphasizing intelligibility over native-like pronunciation and adjusting their teaching to better meet the needs of their students.

5. Discussion

This study explored EFL teachers' beliefs about pronunciation instruction in Chinese tertiary classrooms, filling a gap in the literature on how teachers perceive and implement pronunciation teaching. Five key themes emerged: the importance of pronunciation, instructional methods and goals, teachers' learning experiences, perceptions of learner needs, and desire for professional development. While teachers acknowledge the importance of pronunciation for communication, systematic instruction is often hindered by factors such as previous educational experiences that lacked pronunciation focus, curriculum pressures prioritizing grammar and reading over speaking skills, varying student proficiency levels, and insufficient professional development opportunities. These findings illuminate the intricate interplay of factors influencing teachers' instructional decisions in China.

Consistent with existing literature, this study confirms that pronunciation remains marginalized in many EFL classrooms, primarily due to inadequate teacher training programs (Huensch, 2019; Tsunemoto et al., 2023). In China, this marginalization is exacerbated by the intense focus on high-stakes test preparation, which emphasizes grammar, vocabulary, and reading comprehension over oral communication skills. Unlike global trends that increasingly prioritize intelligibility as a central objective of pronunciation instruction (Levis & Zawadzki, 2023; Derwing, 2019), teacher training programs in China have been slow to adapt, thereby perpetuating outdated pedagogical practices. These systemic challenges underscore the urgent need for curriculum reforms and enhanced professional development opportunities that elevate pronunciation as a fundamental aspect of language education.

A notable finding is the impact of teachers' personal learning experiences on their beliefs about pronunciation instruction. Teachers often replicated or, in some cases, consciously deviated from the approaches they experienced during their own education. For instance, both Mary and Sara, who prioritized grammar and reading, mirrored their prior educational experiences, which is in line with Lortie's (2020) concept of the "apprenticeship of observation." Conversely, Linda's proactive emphasis on pronunciation reflects what Moodie (2016) describes as the "anti-apprenticeship of observation," where she intentionally sought to address the gaps in her own training by prioritizing pronunciation in her teaching. This variability illustrates how teachers' beliefs are shaped by a combination of personal history and reflection, suggesting that there is potential for reflective practice to challenge and reshape traditional pedagogical norms.

Among the influencing factors identified, curriculum pressure linked to exam preparation emerged as the most significant constraint on pronunciation instruction. The Chinese education system's focus on high-stakes exams such as the CET 4 and CET 6, which lack speaking components, marginalizes pronunciation. This issue mirrors broader

trends in East Asia, where countries such as Japan and South Korea face similar challenges, although in these contexts, there are efforts to sustain some level of pronunciation instruction despite exam-driven priorities (Samuell, 2021; Lee, 2023). In China, however, the test-centric curriculum severely restricts opportunities for pronunciation practice, underscoring the urgent need for reform. A more balanced approach, which equally values all language skills, including pronunciation, is essential to support learners' communicative competence.

In summary, this study reveals the complex and multifaceted beliefs that EFL teachers hold about pronunciation instruction. These beliefs are shaped by a combination of personal educational experiences, systemic curriculum pressures, varying student proficiency levels, and limited professional development opportunities. To align teachers' beliefs with effective practices, targeted reforms are essential. These include integrating pronunciation as a core component of teacher training curricula, providing ongoing professional development focused on pronunciation pedagogy, and reforming high-stakes examinations to include speaking and pronunciation components. Addressing these areas would not only enhance teachers' instructional approaches but also help shift pronunciation from a marginal skill to an integral aspect of language education. Such changes are crucial for improving communicative competence in EFL learners and for ensuring that pronunciation instruction is treated as a critical element of comprehensive language learning.

6. Conclusion

This study explored EFL teachers' beliefs about pronunciation instruction in Chinese tertiary context, an underexplored area of language education. The findings identified five themes regarding teachers' beliefs: the importance of pronunciation, instructional methods, personal learning experiences, perceptions of learner needs, and views on professional development. Additionally, four main factors were found to influence these beliefs: schooling experiences, curriculum constraints, students' proficiency levels, and the availability of resources and professional development. In the context of private higher education, teachers' beliefs about pronunciation instruction are largely similar to those in public institutions, reflecting common challenges related to curriculum demands and training inadequacy.

The study highlights several important takeaways. Despite recognizing the value of pronunciation for effective communication and learner confidence, teachers reported lacking a systematic approach to its instruction, largely due to external pressures such as exam-oriented curricula and limited opportunities for professional development. This inconsistency suggests a significant gap between teachers' beliefs and their classroom practices. Moreover, teachers' personal learning experiences heavily shaped their beliefs and instructional methods, indicating the need for more reflective practices and tailored professional development in pronunciation pedagogy.

Although this study presents two key takeaways, it is not without limitations. First, the small sample size constrains the generalizability of the findings. Future studies should include a broader participant pool from diverse educational settings across China, considering regional influences on teachers' beliefs and practices. Second, the reliance on self-reported data without supplementary methods, such as classroom observations, may not fully capture the complexities of teachers' beliefs and practices. Future research should employ mixed methods, combining interviews with observations, to gain a more comprehensive view. Exploring the effects of specific professional development programs on pronunciation teaching or examining beliefs and practices across varied contexts could further refine strategies for integrating pronunciation into EFL instruction and improving language learning outcomes.

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Appendix

Semi-structured Interview Questions

Please fill in the following with appropriate responses

a) Age

31-35

36-40

41-45

46-50

b) Gender

Male

Female

c) What is your highest level of education? (Check one or more that apply)

- Diploma in _____
- Bachelor's degree in _____
- Master's degree in _____
- PhD or doctorate degree in _____

d) Have you ever lived/ studied abroad?

- No
- Yes _____ Years

e) How would you rate your oral proficiency?

- Excellent
- Good
- Fair
- Poor

f) How long have you been teaching English?

- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11-15 years
- More than 15 years

Section One: Beliefs about language

1. Which skill(s) do you believe are important when it comes to English language learning and teaching? What makes you believe that such skill(s) are important?
2. How important do you think pronunciation is in English programs for Chinese university students? Why do you think so?

Section Two: Beliefs about teaching

3. Do you like teaching pronunciation? If not, what are the main barriers to teaching it?
4. How much time do you typically spend on teaching pronunciation each lesson? What factors determine the amount of time you spend on pronunciation teaching?
5. What is your ideal way of teaching pronunciation (formally as part of a lesson, on a case-by-case basis or ad hoc, implicitly, etc.)?
6. Do you feel confident about teaching pronunciation? If not, why not?
7. Between segmental and suprasegmental features, which features do you usually focus on?
8. What is your goal for students' pronunciation? What makes you believe intelligibility/nativeness should be the goal for the students?
9. What kinds of activities and techniques do you usually use to teach pronunciation?
10. In what ways do you assess students' pronunciation?
11. Do you feel there are sufficient resources for you to improve your competency in teaching pronunciation? If yes, what are they?
12. What are your recommendations on how teaching pronunciation could be facilitated in your educational institution?

Section Three: Beliefs about learning

13. From your English learning experiences, what pronunciation problems do you have?
14. What kinds of methods and models were used when you were taught pronunciation?
15. What learning experiences as a language student have influenced the way you teach pronunciation today?

Section Four: Beliefs about teacher-student roles

16. In what ways do you assess what your students' pronunciation needs are?
17. How does the knowledge about students' needs affect the way you address pronunciation in the classroom?
18. What do you do to motivate your students to practice their pronunciation?

Section Five: Beliefs about profession

19. When you became a teacher, did you feel there were some gaps in your knowledge about pronunciation instruction? If yes, what were they?
20. What types of training or professional learning in pronunciation teaching have you received?
21. What needs to be changed or improved regarding EFL teacher training in China to make pronunciation teaching more effectively?
22. What have been the greatest influences on your development as a teacher? Language learning experiences? Past teaching experiences? Teacher training/development courses? Knowledge sharing with colleagues? Or others?

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Authors contributions

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No additional data are available.

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