

Exploring Preferred Qualities in ESL Instructors: Perspectives of Chinese Students in American Universities

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Abstract. This research investigates the perspectives of Chinese international students on effective English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers in American universities, exploring how gender and personality shape these views. Through interviews with eleven participants, key themes emerged regarding preferred teaching styles and traits, disliked teaching methods and traits, and the perceived role of ESL teachers beyond language instruction. The findings highlight a preference for instructors who use visual teaching methods, foster communication, create positive learning environments, and tailor instruction to individual needs. Gender differences were observed, with females valuing cultural understanding and nurturing interactions, while males favored interesting teaching methods. Additionally, student personality played a significant role, with extroverted students preferring interactive activities like roleplay. Limitations included a small sample size and subjective responses. Future research should explore cross-cultural variations and longitudinal impacts, while focusing on enhancing teacher training. This study provides insights into ESL teaching preferences among Chinese international students and underscores the importance of personalized instruction for optimal learning outcomes.

Keywords: ESL Teaching; Teacher Education; Teaching Pedagogies; Language Instructions.

1. Introduction

English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction plays a crucial role in facilitating language acquisition and academic success for international students across various educational levels. Among these learners, Chinese students constitute a significant portion, each with unique perspectives and expectations regarding effective ESL teaching. Understanding these perspectives is vital for educators and institutions to tailor instruction to meet the diverse needs of Chinese international students.

This research seeks to delve into the perceptions of Chinese international students regarding effective ESL teachers in educational settings, encompassing both K-12 and higher education experiences. By exploring the qualities and approaches valued by these students, as well as the influence of gender and personality on their perceptions, this study aims to provide valuable insights into effective ESL pedagogy and the factors that contribute to student engagement and success throughout their educational journey.

Through semi-structured interviews with a cohort of Chinese international students, this study identifies key themes related to preferred teaching styles and traits, disliked teaching methods and traits, and the perceived role of ESL teachers beyond language instruction. By examining these themes, researchers can gain a deeper understanding of the teaching practices and strategies that resonate most strongly with Chinese international students, as well as areas for improvement and further research in ESL pedagogy.

By addressing these questions, this research contributes to the ongoing dialogue surrounding effective ESL instruction and student engagement across various educational levels, ultimately aiming to enhance the learning experiences and outcomes of Chinese international students and other ESL learners in diverse educational settings.

2. Methodology

2.1. Participants

The participants are Chinese international students who are studying in or have graduated from American universities. Table 1 shows their basic background related to this study.

Table 1. Participants' Basic Backgrounds

Participant	Age	Gender	Current Academic Level	Major	Age at Arrival in the US.	Previous Education Type in China	Personality
A	21	F	Senior (In Progress)	Math & Econ	18	Public (International)	Introvert
B	23	F	Undergraduate, soon pursuing Master's	Psychology; Minor in Japanese Grad: Human Development and Psychology	18	Public	Extrovert
C	22	F	Master (In Progress)	Undergrad: Math & Econ Grad: Finance	17	Public (International)	Extrovert
D	22	F	Master (In Progress)	Undergrad: Psychology and Econ Grad: Statistics & Econ	18	Public (International)	Extrovert
E	23	F	Graduate (Undergraduate Degree Obtained)	Computer Science and Statistics. Minor in Econ	15	Private	Introvert
F	21	F	Junior (In Progress)	Data Science & Econ. Minor in Computer Science	14	Private	Introvert
G	22	M	Senior (In Progress)	Finance	14	Public (foreign language school)	Introvert
H	22	M	Senior (In Progress)	Finance & Marketing	14	Public	Extrovert
I	19	M	Freshman (In Progress)	Business & Administration	14	Private (International)	Extrovert
J	24	M	Undergraduate, soon pursuing Master's	Undergrad: Economics; Grad: Finance	19	Public	Extrovert
K	21	M	Junior (In Progress)	Molecular and Cell Biology	15	Private (International)	Extrovert

2.2. Interview Protocol

To explore Chinese ESL college students' perceptions of the qualities of effective ESL teachers, a semi-structured interview method was utilized. The researcher initially approached Chinese

international female students, inquiring about their willingness to participate and commencing interviews with them. Subsequently, some who had completed interviews facilitated introductions to male Chinese international students in the United States, clarifying the research's purpose and approximate interview duration. Eventually, the researcher selected 11 participants, ensuring gender parity.

For participants whose backgrounds were familiar to the researchers, inquiries about their opinions were made directly, without introductory background checks. Conversely, for participants unknown to the researchers, preliminary questions regarding basic background information as Table 1 shows. Before commencing the interviews, participants were given the option to choose their preferred language of communication—Mandarin or English—to ensure comfort and facilitate relaxed expression. The interview protocol comprised ten open-ended questions to elicit comprehensive responses regarding participants' experiences, preferences, and insights concerning ESL English instruction.

1 Can you describe a memorable experience you had with an ESL teacher? What made that experience stand out to you?

2 When you think about an ideal ESL teacher, what qualities come to mind?

3 Could you elaborate on what specific teaching methods or approaches resonate with you the most?

4 Have you ever had a teacher whose teaching style clashed with your learning preferences? If so, what aspects of their teaching did you find challenging?

5 How important do you think cultural understanding and sensitivity are for ESL teachers when working with international students like yourself?

6 Can you recall any instances where a teacher's personality positively or negatively impacted your learning experience? If yes, how did it influence your perception of them as a teacher?

7 In your opinion, what role does the ESL teacher play beyond teaching language skills? How do they contribute to your overall academic and personal growth?

8 Have you observed any differences in teaching styles between ESL English teachers and native English-speaking instructors? If so, what are some of the distinctions you've noticed?

9 How do you think ESL teachers can create a supportive and inclusive learning environment, especially for international students?

10 Finally, based on your experiences, what advice would you give to ESL teachers aiming to create meaningful connections with their students?

2.3. Interview Procedure

The interview sessions were conducted via online video conferencing platforms to accommodate the geographical dispersion of participants. Each interviewee was allocated approximately 50 minutes for the interview process. Throughout the sessions, the researcher recorded responses and observations using typing note-taking methods.

3. Results & Discussion

3.1. Commonalities

3.1.1. Preferred Teaching Styles and Teacher Traits.

Through interviews and related literature, the researcher identifies commonalities among Chinese students' favorite ESL teachers. These commonalities mainly include:

- Application of Visual Teaching Methods

Participants generally prefer the use of visual teaching methods, such as multimedia forms of images, pictures, and videos, as well as real-life examples, to make learning more concrete and vivid, and to increase students' engagement and understanding. For example, Participant K mentioned he made an experiment once about connecting words and numbers with visuals, and he found it was much more effective than merely relying on rote memorization. Participants A and B also believed using multimedia teaching methods, such as audio, pictures, or videos is more attractive and has deeper memorization on students. According to Brennan, the left side of the human brain is associated with numbers, words, and logic, while the right side is associated with images, art, and rhythm [1]. Furthermore, a study by the University of Utah shows that both hemispheres of the brain are regularly used, supporting the effectiveness of visualization methods for students [1].

- **Communicating and Listening**

All participants in this study emphasize the importance of the communication process in learning English and the need for the teacher to be a good listener. They highlight English as a bridge for communication and emphasize the value of interactive activities in promoting students' engagement, language proficiency, and trust in the teacher [2-4]. For instance, even though Participant E initially struggled with speaking up and sharing her opinions in class, her high school English teacher's supportive and easygoing attitude made a big difference. She felt at ease expressing herself around him. This not only strengthens the bond between students and teachers, allowing teachers to know their students better and adjust lessons accordingly but also provides valuable practice for students to improve their English communication skills.

- **Practicality of the Content Taught**

Most interviewees in this study mention the effectiveness of real-life situational learning and the use of practical examples. Male participant G feels that this reinforces theoretical knowledge and is more realistic. Female participant C believes that practical project-related assignments, such as imitating poems, require a higher level of understanding and contribute to deeper knowledge acquisition and more enjoyable learning experiences.

- **Creating a Positive Learning Atmosphere**

All participants value the teacher's humor and ability to create an enjoyable learning environment. They emphasize learner-centered teaching methods that support students' self-motivation and attitudes toward learning rather than forcing them to learn [5, 6]. Teachers' concern for students' lives positively impacts their motivation and comfort, fostering academic motivation and emotional security. For instance, consider Participant A's reflection on her ESL education, where she contrasts experiences with two different instructors. One instructor was notably strict, while the other was characterized by a more lighthearted demeanor. Under the strict instructor, Participant A felt considerable anxiety, leading to hesitance in verbal participation due to fear of grammatical errors and subsequent punishment. Conversely, in the class led by the humorous instructor, Participant A felt more at ease and reported increased self-efficacy, confidence, and motivation to engage in English language learning. However, research by Alzebaree and Zebari indicates that Iraqi Kurdish high school students are less interested in teachers having a sense of humor, and Chen, Dewaele, and Zhang's research conducted in China also shows that teachers' use of humor does not affect students' willingness to communicate [3, 7]. This study is currently unable to determine what factors cause such differences.

- **Attention to Students' Individual Needs**

Most participants stressed the crucial role of teachers in catering to the unique needs of each student. They emphasized the importance of educators recognizing and accommodating diverse learning preferences and needs, echoing the "social-affective strategies" outlined by Alzebaree and Zebari [3]. This involves teachers gaining insight into students' backgrounds, cultures, interests, strengths, and areas for improvement to tailor their teaching methods effectively. For instance, Participant I shared how his ESL teacher used his love for rap music to teach English vocabulary and sentences creatively. Participant B highlighted the significance of ESL teachers focusing on students' personal

development alongside academic grades. These insights underscore the necessity for ESL instructors to be attentive to their student's individual needs and provide support to help them achieve their educational objectives.

- Encouraging Teaching

Participants prefer teachers who actively encourage the use of English and provide timely feedback, as noted by Hien [4]. This approach not only aids in improving English proficiency but also boosts motivation and interest in learning the language. Participants C and D shared a similar experience, where a lack of encouragement or feedback from ESL teachers led to apprehension in using English, highlighting the significant influence of teacher behavior on students' confidence and engagement with the language.

- Incorporating Literature into English Language Teaching

Multiple participants emphasized positive attitudes toward incorporating literature into English language teaching, consistent with previous research findings [8]. For example, Participant K appreciated an English teacher who introduced a wide variety of English literature genres, enhancing language understanding and cultural appreciation.

In summary, ESL teachers preferred by Chinese students commonly use visual teaching methods, emphasize communication and exchange, create positive learning atmospheres, focus on students' individual needs, encourage English language use, and incorporate literature into teaching. These characteristics enhance students' engagement, comprehension, motivation, and English learning outcomes, contributing to their overall development.

3.1.2. Disliked Teaching Methods and Teacher Traits.

- Inflexible teaching methods

According to the interview transcripts, almost all participants express a dislike for rigid teachers, teach solely for their own benefit, and lack passion for teaching. For instance, participants frequently mention teachers who emphasize rote memorization and strictness, causing them significant stress, boredom, and even fear of attending English classes during such periods. This approach may hinder students' language development rather than promoting true Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) practices. However, challenges encountered in CLT implementation include limited training opportunities, low English proficiency among students, large class sizes, and a lack of effective tools for assessing communicative competence [9]. Since most ESL English teachers in this study teach in China, the influence of educational policies in each country on language education practices is significant. Chinese educational policies tend to prioritize test scores, potentially resulting in ESL teachers lacking adequate training and practice in flexible teaching and assessing communicative competence methods [2].

- Failure to attend to all students' development/biased teaching

Many participants in this study report instances of unfair treatment. For example, both Participants E and H mentioned teachers may favor top-performing students, providing them with attention and extra resources, while neglecting students in need of more academic support and disregarding their progress. However, such practices are detrimental to overall student development. According to Hien, fair treatment, feedback, and interactions with teachers positively influence students' attitudes, behaviors, and academic outcomes [4].

3.1.3. Roles ESL English Teachers Play Beyond Teaching Language Skills.

Interestingly, when participants were asked about their memorable experiences with their ESL teachers, none of them mentioned the academic content taught by their teachers. Instead, they highlight the positive impact of their teachers' engaging, inclusive, and patient teaching methods or personalities on their academic and overall character development. Consequently, most participants describe their ESL teachers as "life coaches" due to the significant influence they have beyond language instruction. Participants note that ESL teachers, having likely experienced similar language

learning challenges, possess valuable life experiences and interact with diverse students, enhancing the credibility of their advice. This perspective may also reflect the cultural value of respecting authority figures in Chinese society [7].

3.2. Differences

3.2.1. Gender Differences.

A study conducted by Alzebaree and Zebari in a high school in Kurdish, Iraq, showed that there is no significant difference between male and female students in terms of their perceptions of effective EFL teachers [3]. Both genders value similar traits, but females are less interested in English language culture than males [3]. However, the study observed differences between genders in the way they approach teaching and students, particularly in culturally relevant issues.

There could be several reasons contributing to these differing results. Firstly, the participants in the study were university students rather than high school students, suggesting that they might have experienced more diverse educational backgrounds and cultural exposures, potentially resulting in different perceptions of teacher characteristics and teaching approaches. Secondly, regional differences in the study areas may also play a significant role. Chinese students studying in the United States may be influenced by both Chinese and American educational methods, potentially leading to a richer understanding and experience of English language education compared to high school students in the Kurdish region of Iraq. Lastly, individual experiences and cultural backgrounds could also lead to different viewpoints and preferences. Thus, while both studies involve teaching English as a foreign language, differences in participants may lead to divergent findings.

Gender factors are prevalent in the development of empathy, with females generally having higher levels of empathy than males [10]. In this study, male respondents seemed more concerned with the classroom's level of interest and less concerned with the teacher's cultural sensitivity and criticism or punishment of students. They were also more inclined to believe that international students should be fully integrated into the host country's culture and less concerned with preserving and understanding their own culture.

For example, Male Participant H, proficient in and enjoying public speaking, believed that students not accustomed to public speaking should give speeches catering to American culture, disregarding potential difficulties for other international or introverted students. Male Participant I stated that cultural understanding and sensitivity are unnecessary for ESL English teachers. He believed international students should integrate into American culture, emphasizing the purpose of learning English and understanding foreign cultures. Thus, he argued that ESL teachers only need to understand the local culture, considering awareness and sensitivity to international students' cultural backgrounds unnecessary.

However, all female participants agreed that culture and sensitivity are crucial. As Chen, Dewaele, and Zhang argued, teachers should consider students' socio-cultural backgrounds when designing language instruction, enhancing students' comfort and confidence in second-language communication [7]. Participant B highlighted the importance of teachers recognizing other cultures to be inclusive. She recounted an experience where a teacher treated himself as superior, neglecting the student's culture and focusing solely on American culture, causing the student to feel ignored and uncared for. This emphasizes the importance of incorporating diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) in teaching practices, especially for females.

Additionally, all memorable experiences shared by female respondents about ESL English instructors focused on encouraging, gentle teaching methods. Female participants emphasized the importance of teachers being positive, responsive, and understanding, fostering students' confidence. This cultural expectation may reflect the role of teachers in Chinese society [7]. Several female participants mentioned the negative impact of teachers' attitudes toward them, such as over-criticizing students,

which can lead to demotivation [11]. Participant B emphasized the importance of continuous learning for teachers to adapt to changing educational and different individual needs [2].

In contrast, male respondents' memorable experiences with ESL teachers often revolved around engaging teaching methods rather than qualities like attentiveness and caring. Notably, they appeared unaffected by teachers' punishments and criticisms. For instance, male participant G recalled a memorable incident with his ESL English instructor where he was kept until 6:00 p.m. due to a mistake. When asked about his feelings at the time, he responded that he felt nothing and even giggled while being criticized.

In summary, there are differences between genders in approaching culture, teaching styles, and student interaction. Males focus more on classroom fun, while females prioritize teachers' cultural understanding and positive interactions with students.

3.2.2. Personality Differences.

It's worth noting that differences in student personalities also result in preferences for different teaching methods. Regardless of the participants' gender, many introverted and extroverted individuals mention the same interesting teaching method: roleplay, an instructional activity involving students acting out or dubbing different roles.

Extroverted participants find roleplay very engaging and consider it an effective way to learn English. For instance, extroverted Participant B recalls that her high school organized English dubbing contests and a monthly English performance event. The dubbing contest allows ESL students, especially those culturally and linguistically different from Chinese students, to practice voice intonation and public speaking. The monthly performance event involves each student saying at least one sentence, ensuring everyone's participation. Participant B found this activity enjoyable and eagerly anticipated it, leading her to diligently complete her regular homework. She notes that since it's a small-scale activity within the class, students feel more comfortable performing in a familiar environment.

Introverted participants often find this activity awkward, uncomfortable, and even painful due to their fear of public speaking and acting. However, they are willing to observe their classmates perform. During the interview, the researcher asked Participant D, who expressed a strong aversion to roleplay, if performing in a small group within the class would be less stressful. Participant D acknowledged that it would alleviate some psychological pressure compared to a school-wide performance but emphasized feeling extremely stressed about presenting and speaking in front of others. She recounted an experience where she, as an already introverted individual, was compelled to deliver a school-wide speech and perform an English talent, leaving her feeling humiliated and miserable. This underscores the profound impact that such experiences can have on individuals' confidence and well-being, which varies depending on students' personalities.

4. Conclusion

The study unveiled a nuanced landscape of Chinese international students' perceptions regarding effective ESL teachers, as well as how gender and personality intersect with these perceptions.

Among the commonalities identified, Chinese students expressed a distinct preference for ESL instructors who employ visual teaching methods, foster communication, cultivate positive learning environments, tailor instruction to individual needs, promote English language usage, and integrate literature into their teaching. These attributes were consistently associated with heightened engagement, comprehension, motivation, and holistic development. Conversely, students tended to exhibit aversion towards inflexible teaching approaches, biased treatment, and disregard for diverse student needs, recognizing such practices as detrimental to their language acquisition journey.

Beyond the confines of language instruction, participants bestowed upon ESL teachers the role of mentors, viewing them as catalysts for academic and personal growth. The significance of teachers'

engaging and inclusive demeanor transcended mere imparting of academic knowledge, fostering a sense of trust and empowerment among students, ultimately shaping their academic trajectories and self-perceptions.

However, discernible disparities emerged between male and female students in their perceptions of effective ESL teaching. While both genders valued similar qualities in instructors, females placed a heightened emphasis on cultural understanding, nurturing interactions, and empathetic attitudes. In contrast, males prioritized dynamic teaching methods and classroom enjoyment. These distinctions underscore the interplay between cultural norms and individual preferences in shaping students' expectations of effective teaching.

Furthermore, the influence of student personality emerged as a significant factor in teaching preferences. Extroverted students gravitated towards interactive activities such as roleplay, finding them stimulating and conducive to learning. Conversely, introverted students tended to shy away from such activities, often experiencing discomfort and anxiety. Recognizing and accommodating these diverse needs is pivotal for tailoring instruction to optimize learning outcomes for all students.

Despite offering valuable insights, the study is not without its limitations. The relatively small sample size, primarily comprising Chinese international students in American universities, raises questions regarding the generalizability of the findings to broader student populations and educational contexts. Moreover, the study's focus on Chinese students' perspectives may limit the depth of cross-cultural insights, warranting caution in extrapolating findings to diverse cultural backgrounds. Additionally, the subjective nature of participants' responses, influenced by personal biases, necessitates cautious interpretation of the data.

Moving forward, future research endeavors could adopt a more expansive lens, exploring how perceptions of effective ESL teaching vary across diverse cultural contexts and student demographics. Longitudinal studies tracking students' language proficiency and personal development over time could offer deeper insights into the enduring impact of effective teaching practices. Furthermore, initiatives aimed at enhancing teacher training and professional development, particularly in areas of cultural sensitivity and tailored instruction, hold promise for optimizing student learning experiences and outcomes. By addressing these limitations and embracing future directions, researchers can continue to advance the understanding of effective ESL teaching practices and their multifaceted impact on student learning and development.

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