

Exploring Chinese EFL Primary School Novice Teachers' Perceptions of Institutional Support During Their Transition into Teaching

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Abstract: This study explores novice Chinese EFL primary school teachers' perceptions of institutional support during their transition into full-time teaching. A small-scale qualitative design was adopted, involving four primary school English teachers in China with two to three years of teaching experience. Data were collected through online semi-structured interviews conducted in Chinese and analyzed using thematic analysis. Participants experienced both formal and informal support, including induction, mentoring, classroom observation and feedback, professional development, and collegial support. Support was generally valued when it was practical, accessible, and relevant to immediate teaching needs. However, participants continued to experience challenges related to home-school cooperation, limited EFL-specific support, and curriculum change. Overall, the findings suggest that institutional support should be systematic, continuous, and responsive to novice teachers' changing professional needs.

Keywords: Novice EFL teachers; Primary education; Institutional support; Teacher transition; China

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and rationale

The transition from teacher preparation into full-time teaching is an important stage of teachers' professional development. Novice teachers begin to take responsibility for their own classrooms while adapting to school expectations, professional relationships, and wider institutional demands. For language teachers, this transition can be particularly challenging because knowledge developed during teacher education may not always transfer directly into real classroom contexts^[1]. Early-career teachers may therefore need to adapt previous knowledge while developing practical strategies for classroom management, language teaching, and professional participation.

Institutional support can play an important role in this process. In this study, institutional support refers

to both formal support, such as induction, mentoring, professional development, classroom observation, and feedback, and informal support available through colleagues and workplace relationships. However, the formal existence of support does not necessarily mean that teachers can access it consistently or regard it as useful. Beginning teachers may evaluate similar forms of support differently according to their previous experience, immediate needs, and school contexts ^[2].

The Chinese context is particularly relevant because national teacher-development policies emphasize continuing professional learning and differentiated support for teachers at different career stages. Nevertheless, these policies generally address primary and secondary teachers together. Existing research in China has also focused more broadly on novice English teachers rather than specifically on novice primary EFL teachers. Wei and Xiang, for example, identified mentoring, professional development, and collaborative school cultures as important forms of support for novice English teachers in Chinese public schools, but their study did not focus specifically on primary education ^[3].

There is therefore a need to examine not only what support is available, but also how novice primary EFL teachers themselves experience and evaluate it. The present study addresses this gap by considering formal and informal support together and focusing on teachers' own perceptions of its accessibility, relevance, and usefulness.

1.2. Research aim and questions

The aim of this study is to explore novice Chinese EFL primary school teachers' perceptions of institutional support during their transition into teaching. The study addresses three questions:

- 1 What forms of institutional support do novice Chinese EFL primary school teachers receive during their transition into teaching?
- 1 How do novice Chinese EFL primary school teachers perceive the usefulness of institutional support during the early stages of their teaching career?
- 1 What challenges do novice Chinese EFL primary school teachers continue to face despite the support they receive?

2. Literature review

2.1. Novice teachers and transition into teaching

Novice teachers are generally understood as teachers at the beginning of their professional careers. In language teacher education, Farrell described novice teachers as those who have recently completed teacher education and have usually been teaching for no more than three years ^[1]. The present study therefore defines novice teachers as Chinese primary school English teachers with one to three years of English teaching experience.

Moving into full-time teaching involves more than applying knowledge acquired during teacher education. Novice teachers take on responsibility for classroom teaching, management, assessment, and professional participation while learning how to work within a particular school environment. Previous preparation may not always match actual classroom conditions, and novice teachers may need to adapt their prior knowledge and expectations to local demands. Their transition is therefore shaped not only by individual experience but also by the school context and relationships available to them.

Research on novice EFL teachers has identified interconnected challenges involving classroom management, language pedagogy, curriculum requirements, and adaptation to wider professional expectations^[4]. These difficulties should not be understood simply as the result of limited teaching experience. The guidance, relationships, and professional opportunities available within schools may also affect how novice teachers respond to early-career challenges.

2.2. Teacher cognition and institutional support

Teacher cognition provides a useful perspective for understanding why similar forms of support may be experienced differently. Borg explained that teachers' knowledge, beliefs, assumptions, and previous experiences influence how they interpret classroom situations and make professional decisions^[5]. Novice teachers therefore do not enter schools without existing expectations. Instead, they interpret new experiences through their previous learning and developing professional understandings.

This is particularly relevant to institutional support. Formal support may include induction, mentoring, professional development, classroom observation, and feedback, while informal support may develop through everyday interactions with colleagues. Pogodzinski showed that novice teachers may rely not only on formally assigned mentors but also on other colleagues for practical advice and workplace learning^[6]. Institutional support should therefore be understood as a combination of formal arrangements and the professional relationships that teachers actually use.

Different forms of support may also vary in effectiveness. Induction can help teachers understand professional responsibilities and school expectations, but its usefulness may depend on timing and continuity rather than simply whether an induction program exists^[7]. Mentoring can provide practical guidance, observation, and feedback, particularly when it is regular and closely connected to classroom needs^[8]. More broadly, support is likely to be perceived as useful when it responds to teachers' actual concerns. Fox et al. found that beginning teachers could identify mismatches between workplace support and the support they expected or needed^[2]. This suggests that evaluating institutional support requires attention to access, relevance, and teachers' own interpretations rather than formal provision alone.

2.3. Chinese primary EFL context and research gap

Teacher development in China is supported through national and local training policies, including differentiated provision for teachers at different professional stages. However, broad policy frameworks generally address primary and secondary teachers together and provide limited detail about the specific needs of novice primary English teachers.

Recent research has begun to examine novice English teachers in mainland China. Wei and Xiang found that mentoring, professional development, and collaborative school environments supported novice teachers' responses to early-career challenges^[3]. However, available studies provide limited evidence about how formal and informal support are experienced specifically by novice primary EFL teachers. There is also limited attention to how teachers themselves evaluate the relevance and usefulness of the support they receive.

The present study therefore focuses on novice primary EFL teachers' own perceptions. Rather than examining one support program, it considers different forms of institutional support together and explores how their usefulness is shaped by teachers' needs and professional contexts.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design and participants

This study adopted an interpretivist paradigm and a small-scale qualitative design. An interpretivist approach was appropriate because the study aimed to understand how participants made sense of institutional support within their particular professional contexts rather than measure support as a fixed objective phenomenon ^[9].

Four female Chinese primary school English teachers participated. T1 and T4 had two years of English teaching experience, while T2 and T3 had three years. All were currently teaching English in primary schools in China. Convenience and snowball sampling were used to recruit participants who met the study criteria. As the purpose of the study was to gain an in-depth understanding of teachers' experiences rather than produce statistically generalizable findings, the small sample was appropriate for the research aim.

3.2. Data collection and ethics

Data were collected through online semi-structured interviews lasting approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Semi-structured interviews provided a common set of topics while allowing follow-up questions when participants raised relevant or unexpected experiences ^[10]. Questions focused on teachers' early professional experiences, the support they received, their perceptions of its usefulness, and continuing challenges.

The interviews were conducted in Chinese so that participants could discuss their experiences and evaluations more naturally. Recordings were first transcribed in Chinese, and selected extracts were later translated into English. Because meanings may shift in cross-language qualitative research, translated extracts were checked carefully against the original Chinese transcripts ^[11].

Ethical approval was obtained before data collection. Participants received information about the study and gave informed consent. Participation was voluntary, and participants were informed about recording, confidentiality, withdrawal, and the use of their data. Pseudonyms were used, and identifying details relating to schools, colleagues, and managers were removed.

3.3. Data analysis, trustworthiness, and positionality

The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis ^[12]. Initial codes were generated from sections of the transcripts relevant to the research questions. These codes were compared across participants and grouped into broader themes concerning forms of support, perceived usefulness, and continuing challenges. The researcher repeatedly returned to the original Chinese transcripts to check that the themes remained grounded in participants' accounts.

Trustworthiness was supported through the use of a common interview schedule, repeated checking of codes and themes against the original transcripts, and comparison of translated extracts with the Chinese data. Researcher positionality was also considered. As a Chinese TESOL Master's student, I shared linguistic and educational backgrounds with the participants. This supported rapport and contextual understanding but could also influence interpretation. Reflexive attention was therefore given to questioning, analysis, and translation ^[13].

4. Findings and discussion

4.1. Forms of institutional support

Participants experienced several forms of institutional support, but the structure and accessibility of this

support differed considerably. Induction was one area of variation. T2 experienced the most continuous transition, moving from an extensive university placement into a one-month local induction program and school-based training. T3, however, entered teaching during COVID-19 and missed the induction normally provided. No replacement training was offered, meaning that she had to learn many aspects of teaching independently. T1 and T4 received some initial support, although its content and timing differed. These accounts suggest that formal provision did not guarantee equal access and that the timing and continuity of support shaped teachers' early experiences.

Mentoring, observation, and feedback were among the most commonly reported forms of support. T2 experienced repeated cycles of classroom observation, feedback, revision, and reteaching, which connected mentoring closely with her day-to-day practice. T3's experience demonstrated the limitations of formal mentoring more clearly. Although she had an assigned mentor in her first rural school, the mentor's workload restricted opportunities for observation and interaction. After moving to a township school, she experienced more regular subject-group observation and discussion. The contrast indicates that the effectiveness of mentoring depended on organizational conditions and opportunities for professional interaction rather than formal assignment alone. This supports Gholam's view that mentoring is particularly valuable when it is continuous and practical ^[8].

Informal collegial support also played an important role. Participants exchanged ideas about lesson planning, classroom management, and teaching problems with colleagues beyond formally assigned mentors. T1, for example, described colleagues sharing classroom-management strategies and lesson-planning ideas. These findings support Pogodzinski's argument that novice teachers may rely on wider workplace relationships as well as formal mentoring ^[6]. When school-based support was insufficient, some participants also used online materials independently, although these resources were treated as self-directed professional learning rather than institutional support.

4.2. Perceived usefulness of support

Participants generally valued support when it could be applied directly to classroom practice. T1 used suggestions from experienced teachers to introduce games, role-play, and clearer board organization. T3 described observing another teacher use visual examples for vocabulary teaching and then adapting this approach in her own classroom. She reported that pupils responded positively to the adapted activity. These examples show that support became useful not simply because advice was provided, but because teachers selected, interpreted, and adapted it to their own teaching situations.

Support was also associated with confidence, adaptation, and professional growth. T2 viewed repeated mentoring and feedback as part of gradual development, while T3 felt that observation expanded the range of strategies she could use independently. T4 valued feedback that recognized what she had done well while also identifying areas for improvement. However, she also reported that critical feedback could sometimes lead to self-doubt. This indicates that professional support could contribute to growth without necessarily producing a uniformly positive emotional response.

Participants also emphasized that advice was not automatically transferable between contexts. T2 noted that experienced mentors had taught different generations of pupils and that their methods needed to be adapted to current students. T3's contrasting mentoring experiences in rural and township schools similarly showed that the same formal arrangement could function differently depending on workplace conditions.

These findings are consistent with Borg's account of teacher cognition ^[5], in which teachers interpret professional experiences through their existing knowledge and beliefs. They also support Fox et al.'s argument that available support may not always match beginning teachers' actual needs ^[2]. The usefulness of support therefore depended on its relevance, accessibility, and adaptability rather than on formal provision alone.

4.3. Continuing challenges and support needs

Despite generally positive evaluations of institutional support, participants continued to face several challenges that were not fully addressed by existing provision. Home-school cooperation was one of the clearest examples. All four participants raised concerns about parent communication, parental expectations, or limited support for children's English learning at home. T1 and T2 particularly emphasized the difficulty of encouraging parents to participate more actively in their children's learning. These issues differed from classroom-based problems because improvement depended partly on relationships and decisions beyond teachers' direct control. Participants' existing mentoring and training appeared to focus more strongly on classroom teaching than on communication with families.

Participants also identified gaps in EFL-specific professional support. T2 felt that much formal training addressed teaching from a broad perspective rather than focusing specifically on primary English. T1 similarly wanted more subject-specific opportunities for professional exchange. Curriculum and textbook change created an additional difficulty for T3. She explained that some previous experience and mentor advice became less useful when new textbooks were introduced, leading her to search independently for updated resources. These findings suggest that general teacher support may not always be sufficient when novice teachers encounter subject-specific or rapidly changing curriculum demands.

Finally, participants expressed a preference for support that was more systematic and proactive. T1 suggested a transition period before novice teachers assumed full classroom responsibility, while T3 wanted more systematic induction and opportunities to observe experienced teachers before teaching independently. T4 distinguished between support offered after problems had already emerged and preparation provided in advance, arguing that earlier guidance would be more effective. Participants were therefore not simply asking for more support. Their accounts pointed toward provision that was better sequenced, began early, and continued as new professional needs developed.

5. Conclusion and implications

5.1. Main findings and implications

The findings show that participants experienced institutional support through a combination of induction, mentoring, classroom observation, feedback, and informal collegial relationships. However, formal availability did not ensure consistent access. Participants generally valued support when it was practical, relevant, and adaptable to their own classrooms. They did not simply reproduce the advice of experienced teachers but interpreted and modified it according to pupils, teaching situations, and school contexts.

These findings suggest that support for novice primary English teachers may be more useful when it continues beyond initial induction. Schools could provide regular opportunities for observation, feedback, and professional exchange throughout the early-career period. Mentoring arrangements should also consider

whether mentors have sufficient time to interact with novice teachers rather than relying only on formal assignment. In addition, the findings indicate a need for greater attention to parent communication, EFL-specific pedagogy, curriculum adaptation, and access to updated teaching resources.

5.2. Limitations and future research

The study involved only four participants recruited through convenience and snowball sampling, so the findings cannot represent the experiences of novice primary English teachers across China. The study also relied on self-reported interview data and could not independently verify how support operated in school settings. In addition, translation from Chinese into English involved interpretive decisions despite careful checking against the original transcripts.

Future research could involve larger and more diverse samples across different regions and school contexts. Longitudinal research could examine how novice teachers' support needs change over time, while studies combining interviews with classroom observations, school documents, or perspectives from mentors and school leaders could provide a broader understanding of how institutional support is provided and experienced.

5.3. Conclusion

This study suggests that institutional support for novice Chinese EFL primary school teachers should not be understood simply as a set of formal programs. Its value also depends on whether teachers can access support, how they interpret it, and how well it responds to changing professional needs. Institutional support is therefore better understood as a contextual and developing process rather than a fixed form of provision.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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