

Perceptions of Kindergarten EFL Teachers towards Teaching Pronunciation to Chinese Learners

Yizi Shen & Sze Seau Lee

UCSI University,

Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia

Mansour Amini

School of Languages, Literacies & Translation,

Universiti Sains Malaysia, 11800 Minden, Pulau Pinang, Malaysia

Kam-Fong Lee

SEGi University College, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The involvement of China with global organizations and institutions has raised the significance of English as a subject in Chinese schools. Although kindergarten English education plays a key role in the development of children's language learning, there is limited research on English teaching in kindergartens in China, particularly in the essential skill of pronunciation. In this article, we approach this gap in knowledge by examining the perceptions of Chinese EFL teachers towards teaching pronunciation in kindergartens. The research involved a mixed-methods research design with a sequential explanatory design which collected data through a survey of 108 participants that was followed by in-depth individual interviews with five participants. The findings from the analysis of descriptive statistics and thematic analysis indicated that while Chinese EFL teachers in kindergartens perceive the teaching of English pronunciation as important, the teachers face many challenges in the teaching process and require more purposeful training. It is hoped that the findings can provide some insights to stakeholders in kindergarten English education in China and EFL contexts that face similar challenges.

Keywords: China, English, preschool, quality education, training

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Since China joined the World Trade Organization (WTO), the English subject is now offered in many kindergartens in China, with kindergartens playing a crucial role in promoting the development of the English language among Chinese learners (Hong *et al.*, 2022). Despite the popularity of English education in Chinese kindergartens, there is still a lack of empirical studies in Asia (Luo, 2017). To complicate matters, the *Double Reduction* policy that was issued in 2021 to monitor the overburdening of learners with homework and enrichment classes (Jiang *et al.*, 2023) has affected the regularity and the teaching methods of English in Chinese kindergartens as well. This volatile situation in the teaching and learning of English in Chinese kindergartens requires consistent and updated observation of its developments.

*Correspondence to: Sze Seau Lee (email: cikgujill@gmail.com)

Compared to other skills that contribute to proficiency in the English language, pronunciation has been underlined as a significant yet complicated skill that needs attention in the teaching and learning of English as a foreign language (EFL henceforth) (Jahan, 2011). This research draws attention to the challenges in teaching pronunciation in the English language at the kindergarten level because, specifically, pronunciation is the most important skill when people communicate verbally (Fraser, 2000). The abilities of students in pronunciation in EFL contexts are usually in a precarious situation because EFL students have been more focused on learning English for the sake of passing tests which do not prioritize speaking abilities (Li, 2014).

Prior research has predominantly focused on examining the teaching of pronunciation in EFL contexts, with a particular emphasis on adult learners (Chang, 2022; Mahboobeh *et al.*, 2020; Magiera, 2024). These studies investigated the effectiveness of different phonetic instructional methods on diverse individuals.

However, there is a lack of clear difference in understanding the perspectives and approaches used by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in kindergarten, particularly when it comes to teaching young Chinese children (Lin *et al.*, 2023). Although the development of language in early stage is crucial, there has been a lack of research on the specific difficulties encountered by Chinese kindergarten teachers in the teaching of English pronunciation (Fang, 2022; Yang, 2022).

The absence of clear and standardized rules for teaching pronunciation at the kindergarten level may result in differences in educational pedagogies (Yang, 2022). Often, teachers may rely on their intuition or past experiences, which can cause varied and often ineffective approaches (Fang, 2022). When teaching pronunciation, teachers face challenges such as lack of specialized training, limited resources, and varying levels of phonetic comprehension (Liu & Gajaseni, 2021). All these issues that affect the teaching of pronunciation might impede the development of phonetic skills in young children, leading to persistent challenges as they progress in their language acquisition. Therefore, it is crucial to establish standards to ensure that all students receive consistent and practical instruction in pronunciation, thus enhancing their overall language proficiency and confidence (Low, 2021). These standards provide educators with clear, research-based strategies and materials, leading to more consistent results in various educational settings.

Within this volatile situation of teaching and learning EFL in China and the significance of teaching pronunciation in Chinese kindergartens, the researchers decided to approach the issue from the perspective of teacher perceptions. The theoretical grounding for this study hence is underpinned by the importance of perception (Maba, 2017) and usage-based views of language learning which includes pronunciation (Pennington, 2021). Usage-based views of language learning draw attention to social and psychological factors that affect language learning (Ellis, 2019; Larsen-Freeman, 2019). Perception refers to the process by which a person accepts or understands something through the knowledge and understanding of his or her senses (McDonald, 2012; Liu & Fang, 2017). Although theoretically, there is a general understanding that perception motivates action (Brandmiller *et al.*, 2020; McDonald, 2012), voices of teachers are often under-reported (Deocampo, 2020). According to Maba (2017), a teacher's perception is the reciprocation of the teacher when educating, teaching, guiding, directing, training, assessing, and evaluating children. Teachers' perceptions have significant influences on the classroom strategies that teachers use, thereby ultimately having implications for student motivation and achievement (Hardré *et al.*, 2008). Moreover, since there are no immersive speaking environments in the EFL context, and EFL teachers play an important role in pronunciation teaching (Mahboobeh *et al.*, 2020), the problem of the mastery of pronunciation needs to be understood from the teachers' perceptions.

Having justified the specific problems that need to be investigated through the lens of teacher perceptions, this article aims to examine Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching pronunciation to kindergarten students. The aim was guided by this research question: What are the Chinese EFL teachers' perceptions about teaching pronunciation in Chinese kindergartens?

In the sections that follow, the literature on the challenges of teaching pronunciation at the kindergarten level in EFL contexts will be reviewed to situate the study, followed by an explanation of EFL classes in Chinese kindergartens as the context of the study. Next, the methodology, which involves mixed methods, will be described before the discussion of results.

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Teaching Pronunciation in EFL Contexts in Kindergartens

The teaching of pronunciation is affected by the lack of professional knowledge and professional development among kindergarten EFL teachers. There have been reports of a lack of knowledge about how to teach English subject in countries such as Malaysia (Wan Jumani *et al.*, 2021), Saudi Arabia (Alenezi *et al.*, 2023) and China (Hong *et al.*, 2022). Sargent (2011) pointed out that teachers who graduated with preschool education university degrees in China lack formal English training, which leads to their difficulty teaching English professionally. In China, most of the kindergarten teachers are young and thus not as experienced with effective methods of teaching (Li *et al.*, 2021). The lack of professional development may also be caused by the lack of appropriate teaching resources and essential teaching facilities, as reported in Malaysia (Nasir & Effendi, 2016) and Saudi Arabia (Alenezi *et al.*, 2023).

One solution to ensure sufficient resources for the teaching of pronunciation may lie in the integration of digital technologies with classroom teaching and learning (Pennington & Rogerson, 2018). Nonetheless, even with the availability of resources and facilities, teachers may require the necessary digital training to involve technologies (Masoumi, 2021). Digital training aside, according to Shahzada (2012), EFL teachers should receive accurate pronunciation training, which can enable teachers to be alert to students' pronunciation problems and be able to provide suitable learning materials for pronunciation tasks.

In terms of models of pronunciation, there are divergent views. Ambele and Boonsuk (2021) suggested that English teachers familiarize students with British and American English accents. In countries such as Korea, the socio-cultural sentiments of many parents of higher social classes value the American accent more (Yuwita & Ambarwati, 2023). Other researchers draw attention to comprehensibility (Nikbakht, 2011) and mutual intelligibility (Pourhosein, 2012).

In summary, the teaching of pronunciation in kindergartens in EFL contexts is troubled by a lack of knowledge and expertise among the teachers, while some countries, such as Malaysia and Saudi Arabia, may lack the resources required to teach effectively.

2.2 English in Chinese Kindergartens

In essence, there have been substantial investigation on the inclusion of English in the Chinese kindergarten curriculum. English language instruction in preschools in China generally fall under one of these two forms of provision: one model entails periodic visits by foreign instructors who provide one or

two classes per week, while the other model comprises daily English lessons taught by the home-room teachers (Li, 2022; Tang *et al.*, 2023). Efforts to enhance English instruction in Chinese kindergartens include the use of participatory and theme-based bilingual language education models (Shimpi *et al.*, 2015).

Nevertheless, there are apprehensions about the quality of English instruction in Chinese kindergartens. The teachers have been trained in different specializations, with most of them majoring in early childhood education while the rest major in English (Tan & Perren, 2021). According to Zhang and Adamson (2020), the shortage of qualified preschool English teachers in China persists despite the pool of foreign nationals whose mother tongue is English. Moreover, most of the teachers who majored in early childhood education lack basic knowledge of English (Sargent, 2011). Furthermore, Chinese kindergartens do not comply to a unified standard for English teaching materials, which has led to large differences in the selection of teaching content and materials among the kindergartens (Bullough & Palaologou, 2020).

Zhang (2020) stated that for kindergartens in China that have daily English lessons, the children's exposure to the English language does not exceed 30 minutes per lesson. More importantly, within these 30 minutes, only a small number of teachers teach in English completely. Most teachers only verbalize words and sentences in textbooks. The teacher usually presents the content in English first before explaining it in Mandarin (Qiu *et al.*, 2022). Overall, Chinese kindergarten students find the textbooks too challenging, and they do not have any opportunities to converse in English in class (Hong *et al.*, 2022). In brief, the EFL teachers in China generally have not been adequately trained, and the students lack an immersive environment to learn to speak English and, by implication, pronunciation.

2.3 Challenges in Teaching English Pronunciation to Young Children in China

Teaching English pronunciation to young children is especially challenging in an EFL context like China. One of the challenges in teaching pronunciation lies in the differences in pronunciation features (Yang, 2022). Often, children struggle to differentiate between phonetic sounds that are similar, such as tones or front and back nasals. This difficulty has significantly affected their ability in pronouncing words correctly, both Mandarin and English (Chang, 2022). It is especially prevalent in differentiating between the /s/ and /θ/ sounds (Yang & Resendiz, 2024). Failure to identify proper pronunciation features as such has a significant effect on understanding (Zhang, 2021). Furthermore, another challenge arises as a result of the teaching methods. Substantially, the curriculum in China has largely focused the development of written skills. This approach on written English in educational institutions frequently leads to neglecting oral proficiency, ultimately undermining students' pronunciation abilities (Chang, 2021). Moreover, there appears to be a lack of resources in teaching pronunciation in China, ultimately leading to less efficient learning of pronunciation by the children (Lin *et al.*, 2024). Besides, the quality of teaching pronunciation needs to be improved as some teachers lack the proper skills in teaching pronunciation skills (Fang, 2022). This phenomenon is especially prevalent for those teaching English in rural areas in China. It takes teachers from rural areas more time and efforts to achieve appropriate proficiency, making training on pronunciation challenging (Chang, 2022). To improve their language skills, most people perceive that better teaching materials and methods are required despite there are many problems in teaching pronunciation in China.

3.0 METHOD

This study employed an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Data collection began with selecting 108 kindergarten English teachers in China for a survey through purposeful sampling and convenience sampling, followed by interviewing five participants who were purposefully selected based on their participation in the survey. According to Memon *et al.*, (2020)'s recommended sample-to-item ratio, 108 is an adequate sample number for 20 questionnaire items. For the interview, purposive sampling criteria identified five participants who are actively teaching kindergarten English teachers with relevant degrees and experience in teaching English to kindergarten students. They were labelled as A, B, C, D, E. Among the five teachers, two had recently taken the English IELTS test, while the remaining three teachers had taken the College English Test (CET) at a Chinese university. Table 1 shows the profile of the participants.

Table 1 Profile of Participants

Teachers	A	B	C	D	E
Major	English	English	Preschool education	Preschool education	Preschool education
English Level	IELTS 5.5	IELTS 5.0	CET-4	CET-4	CET-6

The survey was conducted with an online questionnaire containing 20 questions, which were adapted from Luo (2017) and Yağız (2018). These questions focused on gathering data on the perceptions of Chinese kindergarten English teachers about EFL and pronunciation teaching. Compared with paper questionnaires, online questionnaires usually result in fewer errors, fewer blank items, fewer item rejections, and reduced costs (Nayak & Narayan, 2019). The content validity of both the survey and the interview questions was confirmed by a panel of three experts (Tsang *et al.*, 2017). The survey's reliability was indicated through the internal consistency measure of Cronbach's alpha value of 0.8, where internal validity of at least 0.70 has been suggested to be adequate (Tsang *et al.*, 2017). The questionnaire was posted online on the Chinese network of WeChat, Weibo, and Baidu Post Bar for the participants to respond at their convenience. Following the survey, individual interviews with five Chinese kindergarten EFL teachers were conducted to further examine their perceptions of teaching English pronunciation and the challenges involved. The interviews used open-ended questions so that the participants could fully express and elaborate their ideas (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

The quantitative data collected from the survey was analyzed using SPSS version 25 to generate descriptive statistics, while the qualitative data from the interviews was analyzed through thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

4.0 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study examined the perceptions of Chinese EFL teachers about teaching pronunciation. 108 complete questionnaires were collected for the survey. Table 2 presents EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching pronunciation in the form of descriptive statistics.

Table 2 EFL teachers' perceptions of teaching pronunciation

Items Response		Count	N %
1. You are aware of the notion of EFL for international communication.	Yes	67	62.0%
	No	41	38.0%
2. You think learning EFL-related skills is useful for students.	Yes	56	51.9%
	No	52	48.1%
3. You think learning EFL-related skills is necessary.	Yes	72	66.7%
	No	36	33.3%
4. You think learning Teaching EFL-related skills is challenging.	Yes	62	57.4%
	No	46	42.6%
5. You are aware of the communicative value of EFL-related skills.	Yes	71	65.7%
	No	37	34.3%
6. You think your students would like to learn EFL-related skills.	Yes	52	48.1%
	No	56	51.9%
7. You are satisfied with your English pronunciation.	Yes	46	42.6%
	No	62	57.4%
8. You are good at teaching pronunciation.	Yes	51	47.2%
	No	57	52.8%
9. You don't have enough background knowledge in English pronunciation.	Yes	46	42.6%
	No	62	57.4%
10. You need training in how to teach pronunciation.	Yes	59	54.6%
	No	49	45.4%
11. You need to improve your English pronunciation.	Yes	72	66.7%
	No	36	33.3%
12. You think communication does not require correct pronunciation.	Yes	63	58.3%
	No	45	41.7%
13. You believe that explicit pronunciation instruction contributes to students.	Yes	60	55.6%
	No	48	44.4%
14. The current curriculum does not encourage you to teach pronunciation.	Yes	68	63.0%
	No	40	37.0%
15. You don't know how to assess your students' pronunciation.	Yes	54	50.0%
	No	54	50.0%
16. You think monitoring students' pronunciation is necessary.	Yes	57	52.8%
	No	51	47.2%
17. You don't devote time to teaching pronunciation.	Yes	57	52.8%
	No	51	47.2%
18. You have appropriate materials and resources to teach pronunciation.	Yes	64	59.3%
	No	44	40.7%
19. The pronunciation course you have taken at university adequately helps you guide students.	Yes	57	52.8%
	No	51	47.2%
20. You are reluctant to correct students' pronunciation mistakes.	Yes	54	50.0%
	No	54	50.0%

Although most participants (57.4%) perceive that teaching EFL is difficult, a sizable portion of them still believe that EFL skills are important for students (51.9%) and that learning EFL skills is essential (66.7%). These different opinions highlight a complicated interaction between perceived challenges and the perceived value of English language skills, in addition to acknowledging the benefits of fluency in the language despite the acknowledged difficulties in the teaching process.

Items 7–11 were designed to probe participants' opinions on their English pronunciation. The findings show a significant difference in satisfaction levels: 52.8% of participants were satisfied with their pronunciation, while 42.6% said they were not. Additionally, a sizable 66.7% admitted that they urgently need to work on pronouncing words correctly in English. 57.4% of participants claimed to have enough

prior knowledge of English pronunciation, indicating a possible discrepancy between perceived proficiency and the admitted need for improvement in this language area.

The results from items 12–20 relate to English pronunciation instruction. A noteworthy 58.3% of participants state that precise pronunciation is not necessary for good communication. 63.0% of participants believe that the existing curriculum does not provide enough guidance for pronunciation instruction, which may point to a limitation in the curriculum design. The results show that most Chinese kindergartens do not offer English pronunciation instruction, which begs the question of how much attention is placed on this skill in early language education. 52.8% of participants acknowledge that they are not proficient in assessing students' pronunciation, which may be indicative of insufficient training in pronunciation teaching in teacher education. A potential dissonance between belief and practice in the pedagogical approach to pronunciation is indicated by the fact that, although 59.3% of participants feel they have enough resources for teaching pronunciation, and 55.6% acknowledge the importance of explicit pronunciation instruction, an ambiguous 50% admit reluctance to correct students' pronunciation errors.

The following discussion elaborates the findings in more depth with thematic analysis of the interview data.

"Good" English Pronunciation

The participants supported the idea that "good" English pronunciation is defined as having a fluent American or British accent and pronouncing things in English naturally, without a Chinese accent. This viewpoint echoes native-speakerism, which assumes the supremacy of native speakers, particularly those with an American or British accent. The following excerpts illustrate their perceptions:

Teacher A: Fluent American or British English pronunciation is the best.

Teacher B: Good pronunciation is to make people sound comfortable. American ...or ... British pronunciation.

Teacher C: There is no Chinese accent when pronouncing [English words].

The perpetuation of this viewpoint which echoes native-speakerism presents a problem for the teaching of pronunciation in EFL contexts such as China because many teachers cannot model the aspired accents.

Teaching English Pronunciation at a Young Age

Participants who support the creation of specialized courses in kindergartens emphasize how important it is to teach English pronunciation to young students. Participants generally hold the opinion that early exposure to proper pronunciation of the English language offers the best direction for later language learning. Here are some excerpts that express this view:

Teacher B: Children are beginning to learn English at such a young age. This would help them to be exposed to the language sooner, and I feel that it would be beneficial in learning English.

Teacher C: Children's language development ability is the strongest at the age of 3 to 6. Teaching children English pronunciation at this time can not only increase children's interest in English but also lay a good foundation for learning English in the future.

Teacher D: Many parents hope that their children will learn the basics of English from kindergarten.

The participants hence share the common view that it is important to focus on pronunciation instead of merely focusing on writing and reading in kindergartens.

Effective Teaching Methods in Kindergartens

The participants echo the popular belief that frames the use of child-friendly cartoons and English nursery rhymes for teaching English pronunciation as an approach to pique students' attention and improve learning. The excerpts below elaborate these opinions:

Teacher B: Usually in our school, I choose to play English animation in class, and then children can follow the English in the animation because it is impossible for children to directly understand the knowledge of textbooks. As preschool teachers, we choose what children are interested in, and then we can let them integrate into the environment of learning.

Teacher D: The class where I work is directly taught in English. The foreign teacher plays different children's music, and its words are not difficult to say. The students will also sing to the rhythm.

The effective teaching methods that are recommended by the interview participants are those that promote active engagement instead of relying on passive learning through technology.

Positive Attitudes towards Teacher Training

The results of the interviews indicate that the participants have a positive attitude towards teacher preparation for improving teachers' skills and helping pupils learn more effectively. This viewpoint emphasizes the idea that such training is essential to the advancement of modern pedagogical approaches as well as the professional growth of educators.

Teacher B: I think teachers who have experienced professional training will realize that kindergarten teaching is not only a job but also an art, which requires a long time of accumulation and exploration. Secondly, you can earnestly study the teaching rules and regulations, conventions, and teaching methods, and become a qualified teacher.

Teacher D: Through teacher training, you will have more knowledge and understanding of the job. Many pieces of training are to let inexperienced teachers learn relevant skills.

Teacher E: If teachers can be trained in some specific professional courses, I think it is very useful, such as training teacher students like me how to teach English.

No Consensus on Pronunciation Teaching by Native Speakers

The views on whether native English speakers should teach pronunciation to young learners indicate no consensus among the participants. Some perceived it would help with pronunciation correction, but others expressed worries about possible negative effects if the native speaker lacks proficiency in teaching Mandarin pronunciation rules. This discrepancy draws attention to the complex issues surrounding native speakers' roles in pronunciation education. These views are illustrated in the excerpts below.

Teacher C: It would be better for a native English teacher to teach pronunciation because a native English teacher can better cultivate a child's sense of language and enable them to learn more English words in the teaching process.

Teacher D: In kindergarten, it is better to be a Chinese teacher, because most foreign teachers only speak English, so they can only explain grammar and vocabulary in English, which will only make the children even more puzzled. Foreign teachers may be more suitable for older students.

Teacher E: It is good, but the premise is that foreign teachers who can speak Chinese will be better. Because the children in the kindergarten are still young, their language ability is only Chinese. If you can only speak English, you will have problems communicating with your children. The foreign teachers in our school can only speak English, and they also need help from our Chinese teachers when they are in class. It is still a bit difficult.

Overall, consistent with previous research, the survey results highlight that many EFL teachers perceive teaching pronunciation as challenging. Challenges in teaching EFL may be attributed to a lack of resources (Alenezi *et al.*, 2023; Nasir & Effendi, 2016). Another factor that may have contributed to the challenges may be the lack of knowledge (Hong *et al.*, 2022; Li *et al.*, 2021), which is an issue that has been reported in other Asian contexts (eg. Alenezi *et al.*, 2023; Wan Jumani *et al.*, 2021). Both the interviews and the survey underline the need for more training in teaching pronunciation among kindergarten EFL teachers, which aligns with the previously raised issue of the lack of knowledge of the English language and professionalism among Chinese kindergarten teachers (Sargent, 2011). The lack of targeted and meaningful training seems to be a common problem in EFL teacher education, as this issue has been raised in other non-native English contexts such as Malaysia (Shahzada, 2012). Kindergarten EFL teachers in the Chinese context may require more critical training given the knowledge that non-English major kindergarten teachers in China often have pronunciation and intonation problems in their speaking (Hong *et al.*, 2022), and kindergarten teachers are often inexperienced (Li *et al.*, 2021). Nonetheless, the interviews revealed that there is no consensus on the models that can be agreed upon for the teaching of pronunciation.

The interview responses provide suggestions for enhancing the effectiveness of preparation courses, which have been mentioned in the survey as inadequate for EFL kindergarten teacher preparation. Strategies that have been used by EFL teachers in kindergartens which involve singing, music, nursery rhymes, and English animation can be considered for teacher preparation courses. The interview responses confirm Gozcu and Caganaga's (2016) suggestion of teaching children to learn English through playing games. It is also feasible for training in these strategies to be complemented by digital training that is required in kindergartens in the current technologically advanced era (Masoumi, 2021). Employing native speakers of English to teach English in kindergartens is not perceived as an effective intervention, reflecting previous research findings (Ng, 2015).

5.0 CONCLUSION

This study aimed to examine the perceptions of Chinese kindergarten EFL teachers towards teaching pronunciation. The discrepancies in their perceptions highlight a complicated interaction between perceived challenges and the perceived value of English language skills, in addition to acknowledging the benefits of fluency in the language despite the acknowledged difficulties in the teaching process. While the results show that Chinese EFL contexts do not face problems with resources, classroom practices that can improve the teaching of pronunciation need more systematic attention. For stakeholders, including policymakers, school administrators, and teacher training institutions, these findings have several

implications. Policymakers should consider integrating more comprehensive pronunciation training modules into the EFL curriculum and ensuring that these modules are adequately resourced. School administrators could facilitate regular professional development workshops focusing on innovative and effective pronunciation teaching methods. Teacher training institutions might develop specialized courses that emphasize practical, child-friendly techniques such as the use of digital tools, songs, and games to enhance pronunciation learning. By addressing these gaps, stakeholders can improve the quality of English pronunciation teaching, thereby enhancing overall language proficiency among young learners. Despite relying on teacher perceptions, the results of this study can be a useful resource for language and education planning in China and ELF contexts which face similar issues.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare(s) that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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