

What Kind of Novice English Teachers Do the Primary Schools Want?

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Abstract

Background: With the population decline, the number of primary and junior high schools is decreasing. As a result, fewer new graduates are employed in compulsory education in China. The educational institutions of teaching major undergraduates are seeking solutions to the problem of new graduates' difficulty in finding a job as a teacher to increase the employment rate, thereby enhancing the school's enrollment rate. Besides, the disconnect between teacher training institutions and primary schools often leads to dissatisfaction among school administrators regarding the preparedness of new teachers. Novice teachers are suffering, too. **Methods:** Using a semi-structured question guide, a focus group discussion has been conducted consisting of 1 male and 5 female teachers and administrators. A thematic approach was used for data analysis. **Results:** By adopting the method of thematic analysis, we identified seven requirements: Knowledge, Characteristics, Communication, Management, Teaching skills, Experience, and ICT application, which are expected on English teaching graduates, or novice teachers. Furthermore, recommendations for educational institutions include offering classroom management training, guidance for internships, career orientation, curriculum adjustment, and enhanced comprehensive quality training. **Conclusions:** By addressing these requirements and suggestions, universities are expected to better prepare English Teaching graduates to meet the challenges of teaching in primary schools and enhance their overall effectiveness as educators. The results should be considered a foundational step toward developing tailored and effective training programs for English majors aimed at improving the qualifications and effectiveness of English Teaching graduates in primary education.

Keywords: Requirements, Novice Teacher, English Teaching Graduates, Primary School, Focus Groups, English Teacher

Introduction

The population reduction has led to a significant decrease in the number of primary and secondary schools in China. The Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China published the 2023 National Education Development Statistics Bulletin, indicating that there were 143,500 ordinary primary schools countrywide in 2023, reflecting a decline of 5,645 schools, or 3.79%, compared to the prior year. The total number of junior high schools was 52,300, comprising 4 vocational institutions, reflecting a reduction of 132 schools from the prior year, equating to a decline of 0.25%. The employment landscape for undergraduate students aspiring to become teachers has deteriorated, complicating job acquisition. The educational institutions of these undergraduates are likewise pursuing remedies to this issue to elevate the employment rate, thus improving the school's enrolment rate.

China has increasingly emphasized English language instruction, particularly at the primary level, as a significant factor in its modernization and globalization efforts. In 2001, the implementation of English as a mandatory subject in elementary education marked a significant shift in educational policy, intending to enhance linguistic proficiency among students from a young age. This policy corresponds with China's extensive educational reforms and economic initiatives, highlighting the imperative of English proficiency for global competitiveness (Bai, 2022).

The Chinese government has enacted multiple initiatives to enhance English education, incorporating it into the national curriculum and designating it as a core subject alongside Chinese and mathematics (Bai, 2022; Fang, 2017; Qi, 2016). The focus on English reflects contemporary cultural trends and is primarily motivated by the necessity for effective communication in international settings where English serves as a lingua franca (Wen & Du, 2023). The government's dedication is evident through the allocation of resources and the training of English teachers in schools, essential for enhancing the quality of English education in elementary institutions (Gao et al., 2011).

Primary school represents a developmental stage where children exhibit heightened receptivity to language acquisition, according to the characteristics of their evolving cognitive faculties. Studies have shown that the early introduction of English can significantly enhance youngsters' language skills and cognitive development. Research indicates that an earlier initiation of English language learning correlates with greater benefits for pupils in language acquisition. (Mañoso-Pacheco & Cabrero, 2022). This foundational stage not only enhances language proficiency but also promotes the development of cognitive, emotional, linguistic, and disciplinary knowledge skills (Mañoso-Pacheco & Cabrero, 2022).

The disparity between the education received by graduates at universities and the competencies required by employers is more evident from the viewpoint of graduates employed as novice teachers. They admitted that they encounter considerable hurdles from the moment they become real teachers. They delineate difficulties in classroom management (Voss et al., 2017). Ninety per cent of graduates majoring in English expressed dissatisfaction with their pre-service education, citing that the curriculum was excessively theoretical, irrelevant, and inadequate for successful teaching in an elementary school environment (Voss et al., 2017). They noted a divergence between theoretical instruction and practical teaching, as courses excessively emphasized theory at the expense of practical pedagogical

competencies, including teaching practice and classroom management (Zein, 2016). Numerous English teaching programs prioritize theoretical knowledge at the expense of practical teaching tactics, thus leaving graduates ill-equipped for the actualities of teaching (Zein, 2016). Similarly, the study by Xu (2024) demonstrated that participants acknowledged that their teacher education programs provided them with fundamental information about teaching English (e.g., teaching methods and tactics)

Given the challenges faced by English teaching majors in securing employment, the demand for qualified English teachers in primary schools, and the efforts of universities to enhance their graduates' employment rates, it is imperative for universities to understand the requirements of primary schools to align their offerings with employer expectations. This may also prepare its graduates to become educators by linking theoretical knowledge with practical teaching methodologies. Accordingly, the research objectives of this study are to ascertain the prerequisites for English Teaching majors to become qualified primary school English teachers and to determine the measures the university should take. The research questions are formulated based on the research objectives.

RQ 1 What are the requirements for an English teaching graduate to be a qualified primary school English teacher?

RQ 2 What are suggestions towards the university to help train their English teaching majors?

Studies Related To Challenges Faced By Novice Teachers

Numerous scholars have recognized that a deficiency in classroom management abilities is a significant obstacle encountered by novice teachers. For instance, Ergunay and Adiguzel (2019) assert that novices face various challenges, with classroom management being a prominent issue. This observation is echoed by Voss et al. (2017) and Zein (2016), who also highlight the difficulties inexperienced teachers face in managing their classrooms effectively. Supporting these findings, a study conducted by AL-Naimi et al. (2020) involving 15 novice teachers revealed that two-thirds of the participants reported struggles with classroom management.

The divergence between university education and actual teaching environments exacerbates the challenges faced by novice educators throughout their transition into professional roles. Novice teachers frequently struggle to acclimatize to the real classroom setting because of the theoretical focus of teacher training programs. According to Tarone and Allwright (2005), a new teacher's knowledge from language teacher preparation programs does not always align with the actual teaching environment. Similarly, Zein's (2016) study also reveals that the majority of English major graduates voiced discontent with their pre-service education, contending that the curriculum was excessively theoretical and lacked applicability, hence inadequately equipping them for teaching English at the basic level. According to Lee (2017), new teachers are aware that the materials and curricula created for them in their professional programs are different from those utilized in the classroom. Participants in Xu's (2024) study acknowledged that their teacher education programs provided them with fundamental information about teaching English (e.g., teaching methods and tactics). The respondents also stated their required internship, although the quality of their internship cannot be guaranteed because some institutions did not have mentor teachers to oversee them or rigorous norms and requirements (Xu, 2024).

Novice educators face significant obstacles in improving their technological preparedness, which is essential in contemporary varied classrooms. Inexperienced educators encounter heightened demands concerning technical proficiency and the necessity to address the growing variety of students (Öztürk & Yildirim, 2013; Collie & Martin, 2016).

A notable challenge for novice educators is socialization. According to a study conducted on novice English teachers in Guangzhou by Xu (2024), all the participants described they faced challenges in terms of problems in daily teaching and interacting with parents, colleagues, and administrators.

Novice teachers have deficiencies in their pedagogical content knowledge. This shortcoming impedes their capacity to foresee issues within the curriculum, resulting in difficulties in making informed decisions regarding content prioritization (Gaikhorst, Beishuizen, Roosenboom, & Volman, 2017). Consequently, beginner educators may find it challenging to address the varied requirements of their pupils and provide effective instruction.

Other challenges faced by novice teachers include heavy workloads and stress. Fan et al. (2021) conducted an interview with 7 Chinese Foreign Language novice teachers, finding that they are suffering from heavy workload. Saidin (2020) interviewed 6 novice teachers, and the results showed that they face issues related to teaching, are not comfortable with teaching and feel stressed.

Research design

Methods

Data collection for this qualitative study was conducted through focus group discussions with participants. The primary school where the respondents are employed is widely regarded as the premier primary school in a city located in the western part of Guangdong Province, China. To guarantee adequate diversity of opinion, teachers and administrators from all primary school grades were recruited through convenience sampling. Most participants in this study were former students of English teaching majors, and their professional experience as English teachers varied significantly. Participants are chosen based on their ability to contribute to the discussion, their age range, comparable socio-demographic traits, and their comfort in conversing with the interviewer and one another (Richardson & Rabiee, 2001). The objective was to furnish statistics pertaining to the qualifications required for English educators for pupils across all grades in a primary school.

Procedure

This focus group discussion continued until saturation of new information was achieved. The study's aim was explained, and participants were informed of the required actions, with assurances regarding their anonymity and confidentiality. The focus group discussion lasted approximately 60 minutes and was facilitated by a moderator and an assistant (observer), who recorded notes during the discussions and ensured that the moderator did not overlook any participants wishing to contribute comments. Audio recordings were made of the focus group discussions. Beverages were supplied during the focus group discussions.

Question Guide

In accordance with the established focus group discussion methodology, the research team created a semi-structured question guide to ascertain the abilities that graduates of English Teaching majors should possess to qualify as English teachers in primary education. The questions were meticulously formulated based on the purpose of the study. The question guide included preliminary and introductory inquiries that facilitated participant acquaintance and connection, initiating the discussion on the topic. Transitions and pivotal inquiries were employed to direct the group toward the core of the conversation and to concentrate on the research objectives of this study, namely, to ascertain the requirements for English teaching graduates and to provide recommendations for their university. The moderator followed the question outline during the focus group discussion, but she also asked follow-up questions to gain a deeper understanding of the topics, demonstrating sufficient flexibility to facilitate open dialogues between the teachers and administrators.

Data Analysis

Focus group discussions typically produce qualitative data. Employing a thematic methodology, the data were examined for recurring instances, which were systematically identified throughout the data set and categorized using a coding system (i.e., thematic analysis). Similar codes were consolidated into broader concepts (subthemes) and subsequently classified into primary themes.

The replies of teachers and administrators were analyzed by thematic analysis. This approach was selected for its efficacy in summarizing essential traits and offering unexpected discoveries, with the qualitative analyses being conducive to guiding policy creation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We adhered to the six phases delineated by Braun and Clarke (2006), which comprise:

1. Familiarizing yourself with the data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report.

In the initial step, we thoroughly examined participants' responses multiple times and documented noteworthy or aspects related to our research inquiries. Maintaining awareness of research objectives while coding might prevent a substantial quantity of codes and offer a framework for establishing categories of codes as stated by (Belotto, 2018). We reviewed our notes and formulated initial concepts regarding the coding. During phase two, we implemented a more structured coding procedure. During phase three, we combined codes with related content and create preliminary themes. During phase four, we reviewed, evaluated, adjusted, and refined the themes. The principal adjustments involved amalgamating overlapping ideas and establishing a single overarching theme, with certain topics designated as subthemes, to maintain coherence and distinctiveness for each theme and subtheme. In phase five, we polished and delineated the themes and subthemes to ensure their distinctiveness.

Results

This study performed one focus group discussion with six participants, comprising English instructors or administrators from the investigated primary school. The sample (n = 6) comprised 1 male and 5 females, aged between 24 and 45 years, with teaching experience in English varying from 2 to over 21 years. All respondents were once English Teaching majors. A set of prerequisites for English Teaching majors was established based on the study of this focus group discussion. The framework comprises seven principal levels: i.e. knowledge(master English, the language), learning ability and psychological quality(desire to learn from those experienced teachers and able to accept and recover from criticism), socializing and communication competency (get on well with colleagues and students), classroom management competence(able to make students listen to him or her and obey his or her instructions), mastery of teaching methods(wording for instruction should be comprehensible to young learners), internship experience (have experience of working as a student teacher) and proficiency in ICT application to teaching.

4.1 RQ 1 What are the requirements towards an English Teaching graduates to be a qualified primary school English teacher?

Seven main themes and nine sub-themes were identified.

Main theme	Subtheme	Definition
Knowledge	A solid foundation in English, especially in terms oral English	The in-service teachers and administrators believe a qualified English teacher should have mastered English.
Characteristic	Learning ability	English Teaching graduates should have the ability to keep learning, learning from the experienced teachers.
	Psychological quality	English Teaching graduates should have a good mindset and be easy to recover from criticism from the experienced teachers.
Communication	Socializing	English Teaching graduates should learn to get on well with colleagues.
	Communication skills with students	English Teaching graduates need to be good at communicating with pupils and welcomed by primary school children.
Management	Classroom management skills	English Teaching graduates usually lack the competency to manage the classroom.
Teaching skills	Mastery of teaching methods	English Teaching graduates usually lack proper teaching methods to instruct primary school students.
Experience	Internship experience	Having experience of working as an internship teacher helped English Teaching graduates turn teachers swiftly.
IT application	Proficiency to apply ICT to teaching	English Teaching graduates should possess ICT skills.

Knowledge

Participants largely concurred that proficient English Teaching graduates must possess a robust foundation in English, particularly in verbal communication. To be an effective English teacher, one must first possess a comprehensive mastery of the language. Although speaking is the most overt demonstration of language proficiency for an English instructor, a competent English teacher should communicate in oral English with commendable fluency as required. The shared attribute of the two English Teaching graduates who received rapid promotions was a robust understanding of fundamental English language principles, particularly in oral communication.

Characteristic

The importance of learning ability is emphasized and teacher trainees are expected to be psychologically sound, able to take criticism and actively learn from senior teachers. Those newly graduated teachers appreciated by the respondents are strong learners. They are hardworking and committed to their work, able to study hard and seek advice from senior teachers. They are psychologically strong and not afraid of criticism.

The significance of learning ability is underscored, and novices are anticipated to possess psychological resilience, accept constructive criticism, and engage in active learning from experienced educators. The recently graduating instructors, valued by the respondents, are proficient learners. They are diligent and dedicated to their tasks, capable of rigorous study and soliciting guidance from experienced educators. They possess psychological resilience and are unafraid of critique.

Communication

Emphasis is given to the capacity to communicate proficiently with colleagues and students, cultivate a positive rapport with pupils, and provide excellent individual tutoring. The two new teachers who got promoted fast exhibit social competence. They maintain harmonious relationships with colleagues and are favorably regarded by students due to their effective communication skills during individual counseling sessions. Serving as a classroom teacher has intensified interactions with students, particularly the necessity to counsel and engage in discussions with specific pupils, so strengthening the student-teacher relationship. The necessity for class instructors to regularly communicate with parents, along with the distinct perception pupils have of them compared to that of a standard subject teacher, facilitated more effective classroom management. The experience of serving as a classroom teacher is considered highly beneficial for graduates.

Management

A significant number of graduates lack proficiency in classroom management. A novice educator acknowledged that primary school students exhibit greater disciplinary issues regarding classroom management, necessitating considerable time investment in this area upon entering the profession, consequently diminishing the quality of their lessons. The classroom teacher's role in students' perceptions significantly contrasts with that of a conventional single-subject instructor, hence facilitating classroom management. The expertise of being a classroom teacher is considered highly beneficial for effective class management.

Another indicated her swift enhancement in classroom management resulting from consistently instructing a class of pupils over an extended period, such as till their graduation.

Teaching skills

Mastering the technique of explaining complex knowledge in an easy-to-understand manner is essential to meet the learning requirements of primary school kids.

“While my foundational knowledge is robust, I lack strategies to convey this information clearly for effective instruction to primary school students. Graduates would greatly benefit from receiving pertinent assistance during their college studies” said one respondent.

Experience

Internships are considered a crucial method for enhancing teachers' competencies, facilitating the rapid accumulation of teaching experience for student teachers. The internship is perceived as arduous; nonetheless, for English Teaching majors, it facilitates accelerated growth. They are also expected to excel in the application process for teaching positions and to demonstrate superior performance as a teacher reservist.

“The internship experience really enhanced my teaching career. At that time, I lacked experience; nonetheless, I diligently learned from senior colleagues, emulated their teaching techniques, and adopted their classroom management strategies, enabling me to make great progress within two months. Employment facilitates a student's swift development into a teacher and the rapid accumulation of experience.”

One respondent even provided an example of an intern who, with fervent dedication, has undergone significant development within two months, transforming from an entirely inexperienced university student into a competent teacher capable of independently conducting English classes and delivering open lectures for observation by fellow educators. The other responses expressed high praise for this student's performance as well.

ICT application

English Teaching graduates should possess ICT skills, especially the use of AI to aid and embellish courseware design.

One participant said “I think the ability to use information technology, should also be slightly cultivated during the learning process at university. Because we can notice that new teachers have this ability in information technology, if they are good at it, they can make courseware and have the ability to use AI to assist in teaching their subject.”

4.2 RQ 2 What are suggestions towards the university to help train the required graduates?

Main theme	Sub-theme	Definition
Classroom management training	Enhance classroom management training	It is recommended training in classroom management should be added to the curriculum.
Guidance for internships	Provide guidance for internships to get students ready for the challenge of being an intern teacher	Before the internship, give students sufficient psychological preparation and clarify the identity change of interns.
Orientation change	Adjust the training orientation according to the job market	It is recommended that students should change to aim at being secondary school English teachers and upgrade their qualifications.
Curriculum	Adjust the curriculum to the requirements of the employers	Lesson analyses, observation courses, and courses that provide intuitive training in teaching skills should be added to the current curriculum.
Comprehensive training	Offer comprehensive training	Attention should be paid to the comprehensive quality of students, including psychological management ability, global perspective, and information technology ability.

Classroom management training

In-service educators and administrators advised that language schools of universities incorporate classroom management training into the curriculum to improve students' capacity to manage the classroom effectively.

"The common problem is that graduates are weak in classroom management, and it is hoped that the College of Foreign Languages will strengthen its teaching in this aspect."

Provide guidance for internships and top-ranking internships

Before the internship, give students sufficient psychological preparation and clarify the identity change of interns.

"The students who came by lottery also had reluctant thoughts and hoped that the university would prepare students psychologically before arranging for them to work in the positions. It doesn't matter that students don't have teaching experience, what is important is that they can persevere in their studies and have good mental qualities to cope with difficulties. College students should realize in time that their identity has changed during the internship and see themselves as a teacher, not a college student."

Orientation change

With the saturation of the demand for primary school English teachers, it is recommended that students develop their secondary school English teaching skills to help them change their career goals. It is recommended that teacher trainees, if possible, upgrade their qualifications.

"Due to the precipitous decline in births, the demand for English teachers in primary schools in the city is nearly saturated, while there is a shortage of Chinese teachers in primary schools. In this regard, it is recommended that the university should cultivate students by strengthening their own strengths, change their goals by aiming at secondary school English

teacher positions, and upgrade their qualifications to better cope with the demand of secondary schools for teachers with high academic qualifications” said one administrator.

Curriculum

Lesson analyses, observation courses, and courses that provide intuitive training in teaching skills are offered to help enhance students' teaching ability and professionalism.

One respondent suggested “We hope that the university could offer courses on lesson analyses, observation courses, etc. to university students in order to enhance the teaching abilities of university teacher trainees.”

It is also recommended that there be intuitive teaching skills training in teaching

Comprehensive quality training

The selection and training procedure should emphasize the holistic quality of English teaching majors, encompassing psychological management skills, global perspective, and information technology proficiency.

English Teaching majors must possess professionalism and learning capabilities; psychological management skills (resilience to frustration); a global perspective and cultural inclusiveness; proficiency in information technology, particularly in utilizing AI to enhance course design; classroom management skills; the ability to synthesize knowledge profiles or refine language; and collaboration and communication skills (including open-mindedness and the willingness to seek assistance).

Discussion

The purpose of this explorative study was to identify the requirements to be an English Teaching graduate to be a qualified primary school English teacher. Furthermore, we aimed to collect ideas and recommendations towards the university to facilitate the development of effective and tailored intervention programs aiming to help train English teaching majors. By adopting thematic analysis, we identified seven determinants, Knowledge, Characteristics, Communication, Management, Teaching skills, Experience, and IT application.

Consistent with the research conducted by Voss et al. (2017), Zein (2016), Mañoso-Pacheco & Cabrero (2022), and Murphy & Weinhardt (2020), our participants indicated that various factors, including social skills, pedagogical competencies, and classroom management, are perceived to impact English teacher trainees in their development into proficient primary school English educators. Our findings provide additional support for them.

The research by Voss et al. (2017) and Zein (2016) highlighted the deficiency of classroom management abilities among beginner English teachers, a finding corroborated by this study. Consequently, Harun and Kabilan (2020) proposed that teacher education programs require modification to incorporate increased practical training and engagement with primary schools. This aligns with the recommendations provided by in-service educators and administrators in this study.

The respondent also referenced the challenges of adapting to the actual school setting as noted by Zein (2016) and Lee (2017). The absence of pedagogical skills for instructing young

learners was noted in this study. In terms of technological competence mentioned by Öztürk and Yildirim (2013), and Collie and Martin (2016), our respondent asserts that English major graduates must attain sufficient ICT proficiency, with a specific emphasis on the utilization of AI for creating slides and other instructional materials. Participants also referred to socializing with colleagues, as noted by Xu (2024). They emphasized the need to learn from the experienced educator and the necessity of a humble demeanor. Furthermore, they also reference communication with pupils. A positive relationship is essential for effective classroom management.

Furthermore, our participants identified the traits that a competent beginner instructor should possess. They must excel in learning and possess strong mental resilience to confront criticism from experienced educators while acquiring knowledge from them. Intern teaching experience is often referenced. Internships are supposed to facilitate the rapid transition of an English major into a qualified teacher. Interns derive significant advantages from internships. They also acknowledge the significance of a robust command of English, particularly in speaking proficiency.

The second study question pertains to the recommendations for the university to enhance the training of graduates. They propose that institutions of higher education integrate classroom management training into their curriculum to improve students' capacity to manage the classroom effectively. Students should receive sufficient psychological preparation prior to internships, and the shift to the intern identity must be elucidated. Due to the oversaturation of demand for elementary English teachers, it is advisable for students to cultivate teaching competencies for being middle school English teachers and further their studies. They also suggest that universities deliver pragmatic training in pedagogical skills, including course evaluation and classroom observation, to augment students' teaching competencies and professionalism. During the selection and training procedure, students' comprehensive quality, encompassing psychological management abilities, worldwide viewpoint, and information technology proficiency should be emphasized.

Conclusion

The results demonstrate that graduates are required to have proficiency in the English language, good personal traits such as being proficient learners and having psychological resilience, and their capacity for effective communication with students and coworkers. Moreover, classroom management abilities, pedagogical techniques, practical experience via internships, and information technology competency are crucial in determining their efficacy as educators.

Universities are advised to integrate classroom management training into their curricula, offer guidance during internships, and encourage students to develop skills pertinent to secondary school teaching in light of the oversaturation of primary school posts. Moreover, augmenting the curriculum with courses on lesson analysis and intuitive teaching skills, while emphasizing the holistic development of graduates' competencies—such as psychological management, IT proficiency, and effective communication—will more adequately equip them for the challenges they will encounter in their careers.

By fulfilling these requirements and recommendations, universities are anticipated to more effectively equip English Teaching graduates to confront the challenges of primary school instruction and improve their overall efficacy as educators. These enhancements will benefit not only the graduates but also the educational landscape.

The results should be considered a foundational step toward developing tailored and effective training programs aimed at improving the qualifications and effectiveness of English Teaching graduates in primary education. However, this study contains a quite small sample size and only one primary school is investigated. Further study is recommended to include more samples and more primary schools or even secondary schools.

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