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Teaching for tests or teaching for learning? A sociocultural activity theory analysis of TESOL teachers' contradictions in China's English language centres

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Abstract

This qualitative case study investigates how TESOL teachers in China's commercial English language centres (ELCs) navigate exam-related washback through a configuration of interrelated pedagogical contradictions. Drawing on Vygotsky's genetic method, Engeström's activity theory, and Bailey's washback framework, the study analyses two teachers' lived experiences using interviews, reflective accounts, and institutional documents. Findings reveal contradictions across instructional objects, tools, and rules, shaped by exam performance demands and commercial imperatives. Rather than passive compliance, teachers exercised situated agency through pedagogical re-centering and mediated sequencing of instruction. Overall, the study advances washback research by showing how exam-related pressures are enacted and navigated as structural contradictions within teachers' activity systems, with implications for research, institutional leadership, and teacher agency in commercial ELCs.

1. Introduction

Around the world, English language teaching (ELT) in commercial and exam-oriented settings is shaped by strong external pressures, including institutional performance metrics, market competition, and wider societal beliefs about the value of English for mobility and opportunity (Murray, 2018; Scott, 2020). In such environments, the demand for quick, visible progress often influences how curricula are structured and how learning outcomes are defined, with efficiency, measurability, and client satisfaction becoming central organisational concerns (Smith & Worsfold, 2013). These dynamics increasingly define everyday teaching conditions in many for-profit language education sectors globally (Robinette, 2020).

In China, these tendencies are intensified by the rapid expansion of English language centres (ELCs), where market competition and high enrolment expectations place considerable pressure on programs to demonstrate short-term gains (Guo & Beckett, 2012). To meet these expectations, many ELCs frequently introduce standardised teaching packages, fixed lesson structures, and closely monitored performance indicators as a way of ensuring consistency across teachers and maintaining institutional credibility (Cushing, 2021). While such measures support organisational stability, they can significantly constrain teachers' pedagogical discretion and narrow the space for responsive, developmental instruction (Buchanan et al., 2019; Sawyer, 2011).

Against this backdrop, teachers working in these settings may encounter a range of contextual difficulties (Scott, 2020). They are positioned between institutional expectations that prioritise prescribed materials, tight pacing, and the demand for demonstrable progress (Buchanan et al., 2019), and their professional responsibility to attend to students' diverse linguistic needs and broader learning goals (Buchanan et al., 2019). Such conditions create a complex instructional environment in which teachers' work is shaped by multiple and competing demands (Sorto et al., 2018).

Teachers would benefit from relevant theoretical and empirical insights in addressing these contextual challenges. However, a review of the literature reveals both empirical and theoretical gaps. Empirically, limited studies have examined English teachers' classroom experiences, pedagogical decision-making,

and day-to-day tensions within China's for-profit English education sector (e.g., Robinette, 2020; Yan, 2023). Even when teaching tensions are acknowledged in some studies (e.g., Cushing, 2021; Guo & Beckett, 2012), they are often framed as contextual constraints rather than as sites of learning. Theoretically, two gaps are evident. First, many TESOL teaching studies (e.g., Wang & Sanchez, 2023; Yi-Hsiang & Yen-Ling, 2021) conceptualise pedagogy primarily as a set of techniques or instructional strategies, paying insufficient attention to teaching as a situated and relational practice shaped by teachers' personal histories, institutional arrangements, social interactions and cultural-historical conditions. Second, while washback research has illuminated how high-stakes tests influence curriculum and instructional behaviour (e.g., Bailey, 1996; Cheng, 2017), much of this work treats washback at a macro or policy level and gives limited attention to how teachers navigate examination pressures within the micro-contexts of commercial ELCs. In other words, existing studies seldom explore how test-driven expectations intersect with the institutional and social conditions that structure teachers' everyday teaching work. These gaps suggest the need to conceptualise teaching in commercial ELCs as a socially organised activity shaped by historically embedded contradictions arising from test-driven and commercial pressures, and to examine how such contradictions may function as developmental drivers rather than merely contextual barriers.

This study adopts a sociocultural perspective (Engeström, 2001; Vygotsky, 1930/1978) and the washback framework (Bailey, 1996) to illuminate the contextualised, multi-layered nature of teaching in commercial ELCs. By examining two TESOL teachers' lived teaching experiences at ELCs in China through a case study approach, the present study aims to investigate how contradictions are experienced and navigated in everyday instructional practices.

It was guided by the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What contradictions do TESOL teachers experience at ELCs in China under test-oriented and commercial conditions?

RQ2: How do teachers navigate the contradictions in teaching?

2. Literature review

2.1. The landscape of TESOL teaching in China and its manifestation at ELCs

Contemporary TESOL teaching in China is situated within a rapidly evolving educational landscape shaped by the growing societal demand for English proficiency (Wang et al., 2018), intensified competition for overseas study (Ilieva et al., 2015), and heightened scrutiny of exam outcomes in English education (Wang et al., 2018). In response, curricular reforms within schools and universities have attempted to balance communicative competence with exam preparation (Beckett, 2012); however, studies continue to document tensions between pedagogical ideals and the prevailing test-oriented

culture (e.g., Ngo, 2022; Wang, 2016). Despite this, most studies focus on mainstream institutions and overlook the expanding commercial sector, where exam-driven expectations are also intensified (e.g., Beckett, 2012; Walker, 2014).

In recent years, ELCs have become a prominent site of TESOL activity; however, research on their pedagogical conditions remains underdeveloped, particularly with regard to how managerial structures, commercial imperatives, and exam-driven institutional demands shape everyday teaching. Several studies note that rather than merely standardising instruction (Cushing, 2021), managerial structures at ELCs often reconfigure authority and professional responsibility within teaching practice (e.g., Alehegn & Qudah, 2025). Specifically, this reconfiguration shifts decision-making power from teachers to management, with teachers being required to follow externally imposed guidelines and performance metrics, reducing their autonomy in teaching and curriculum design (Murray, 2018; Scott, 2020). Such arrangements reshape teachers' pedagogical agency, positioning them within tightly regulated performance regimes that overlooks developmental responsiveness (Buchanan et al., 2019). This strand of research, though valuable, tends to treat ELCs as homogeneous entities and pays insufficient attention to internal tensions teachers face as they negotiate organisational demands, student expectations and their own pedagogical values (McNaughton & Billot, 2016).

Another distinctive feature of commercial ELCs is the intensity of commercial imperatives (Walker, 2014). Enrolment stability, client retention and brand reputation function not only as administrative goals but as forces directly shaping pedagogical decision-making (Warriner, 2015). Many studies argue that institutions frequently evaluate teaching quality through customer satisfaction, as reflected in monthly performance reports (e.g., Robinette, 2020; Yan, 2023). Yet these studies rarely probe how commercial aims intersect with teachers' day-to-day classroom work or how teachers reconcile institutional profitability with educational responsibility (Zhou et al., 2025).

Furthermore, the prominence of test preparation within ELCs intensifies these tensions. High-stakes exams such as IELTS and TOEFL generate powerful washback effects, reshaping curriculum content, pacing expectations and even teacher identity (Estaji & Ghiasvand, 2019). Existing research shows that exam preparation environments often prioritise narrow test-wise strategies, repeated drilling of past papers, and formulaic instruction aligned with scoring rubrics (e.g., Davis & Vehabovic, 2017; Ghaleb, 2024). While such strategies may yield short-term score gains, scholars argue that they may undermine deeper communicative development and perpetuate reductive notions of language learning (Thaidan, 2015). However, much of the washback literature operates at macro or policy levels (e.g., Estaji & Ghiasvand, 2019; Göktürk Sağlam, 2018); few studies examine how teachers in commercial ELCs personally interpret, negotiate or resist exam-driven instructional demands.

2.2. Conceptual underpinnings

This study draws on three complementary concepts, including Engeström's (2001) third-generation Activity Theory (AT), Vygotsky's genetic method (GM) (Vygotsky, 1930/1978), and Bailey's (1996) washback framework, to analyse contradictions teachers encounter and their navigational strategies.

The third-generation AT (Engeström, 2001), as its primary analytic framework, conceptualises teaching as a collective, object-oriented activity system mediated by tools, rules, communities, and divisions of labour (Engeström, 2001). Central to AT is the concept of contradictions, structural contradictions within or between components of an activity system, long viewed as catalysts for disturbance, adaptation, or innovation in pedagogical practice (Engeström, 1993). Specifically, change and development takes place as contradictions create disturbances that drive innovative efforts and action to resolve the contradictions (Engeström, 2001). Prior research in teaching has used AT to examine contradictions teachers encounter when institutional expectations conflict with pedagogical values or available mediational tools (e.g., Dang, 2013; Nguyen & Ngo, 2023).

In this study, the unit of analysis is each teacher's teaching activity system situated within an ELC, which is analysed in relation to the centre's activity system (Engeström, 1993). As Fig. 1 shows, within each activity system, the subject refers to the primary actor engaged in the activity (e.g., TESOL teachers or the ELC), while the object means the goal toward which the activity is directed (e.g., developing students' authentic language abilities). Tools comprise mediating artefacts through which the activity is enacted (e.g., tailor-made materials). Rules shape the activity through explicit or implicit norms (e.g., requiring adherence to standardised curriculum). The community includes social groups surrounding the activity (e.g., peer teachers or centre management), and the division of labour refers to roles and responsibilities among participants (e.g., supervising teachers design materials while others implement them). This model enables a systematic examination of contradictions teachers face, such as the contradiction between teachers' pedagogical rules and ELCs' commercial goals, and how teachers navigate these contradictions in everyday instructional work to support professional growth.

The GM provides a multi-layered developmental lens consisting of the cultural-historic (the social settings of human activity), ontogenetic (the individual lifespan), and microgenetic domains (immediate events) (Vygotsky, 1930/1978). Previous studies using GM in teaching research demonstrate its value in capturing how teachers' pedagogical decisions are shaped by historical experiences, moment-to-moment interactions, and broader socio-cultural contexts (e.g., Dang & Marginson, 2013). In this study, the GM drew attention to teachers' lived histories, their real-time pedagogical sense-making, and wider commercial and exam-oriented conditions that frame their teaching.

Given that commercial ELCs in China are strongly shaped by exam preparation, Bailey's (1996) washback framework provides a necessary complementary perspective. This framework conceptualises washback as operating through interrelated dimensions of participants, processes, and products, highlighting how high-stakes tests influence not only teaching outcomes but also the actors involved and the practices through which instruction is enacted (Bailey, 1996). Washback research has shown that high-stakes tests often shape curriculum pacing, instructional strategies, and notions of effective teaching (e.g., Davis & Vehabovic, 2017; Ghaleb, 2024). While washback can operate in both positive and negative forms (Bailey, 1996; Cheng, 2017), this study focuses on instances where exam-driven pressures function as negative washback by narrowing instructional possibilities and intensifying institutional control over teaching practices. Integrating washback into the analysis thus illuminates how exam-driven

institutional priorities amplify contradictions, such as pressures for efficiency or alignment with test formats, and influence teachers' pedagogical decision-making and coping strategies.

Together, the GM, AT, and washback framework play complementary roles in this study. The GM structures data collection and analysis by foregrounding teachers' developmental histories and real-time interactions (Vygotsky, 1930/1978); AT provides the analytic apparatus for identifying and interpreting contradictions within the teaching activity system (Engeström, 2001); and the washback framework situates these contradictions within the wider exam-oriented institutional logic of commercial ELCs (Göktürk Sağlam, 2018). This integrated approach enables a nuanced analysis of how teachers experience and navigate contradictions at ELCs.

3. Methodology

The present study is part of a larger project examining how English teachers in China's commercial ELCs navigate linguistic racism within exam-oriented and market-driven institutions. From a wider cohort of 20 teachers, this paper focuses on two participants, Claire and Sophia (pseudonyms). They were selected because their teaching trajectories exhibited particularly clear and contrasting contradictions between pedagogical intentions and institutional expectations. Their cases provide sufficiently rich detail to illuminate how teachers negotiate such pressures in everyday classroom work. At the same time, both were broadly representative of the larger cohort in terms of background, including similar educational experiences, including taking exams such as IELTS and studying abroad, and teaching at ELCs after graduation (see more details in the Findings section), making their experiences analytically useful for understanding wider patterns in the dataset.

3.1. Case study

This study adopts a qualitative case study, situated within an interpretivist paradigm, which enables an in-depth examination of complex, context-embedded teaching phenomena that cannot be meaningfully captured through large-scale or decontextualised designs (Yin, 2018). Given that contradictions arise through the interaction of institutional norms, commercial imperatives, teaching tools, rules, and teachers' own histories, a case-based approach provides the necessary analytical sensitivity to trace these dynamics as they unfold in real instructional settings (Lyons & Bandura, 2018; Yin, 2018). In this study, two cases, Claire and Sophia, were purposefully selected as information-rich exemplars illustrating distinct contradictions shaped by washback effects and institutional expectations, allowing for a fine-grained analysis of how each teacher experiences contradictions and enacts navigational strategies to reconcile these contradictions in their activity systems.

The case study design also aligns with the study's conceptual framework because it foregrounds in-depth, case-based inquiry situated within real-world institutional settings (Yin, 2018), enabling a contextualised and holistic examination of teachers' instructional strategies as they unfold within specific environments. Rather than isolating discrete teaching episodes, the case study approach allows

instructional practices to be examined across time and situations (Yin, 2018), supporting an analysis of teachers' pedagogical action as an integrated process shaped by washback effects and institutional expectations.

3.2. Research contexts

Within this broader landscape, the larger project followed 20 Chinese English teachers working across different cities and institutional brands. Most were in their mid-twenties to mid-thirties, with undergraduate or postgraduate qualifications in English, translation or TESOL, and between two and ten years of teaching experience. All were engaged in exam-related courses, but their institutions varied in size, ownership structure and managerial style. Across sites, teachers described working under multiple forms of accountability, including student evaluations, complaint systems and internal performance reviews linking effective teaching to enrolment stability and test score outcomes. These shared conditions formed the backdrop against which issues of institutional constraints and pedagogical decision-making were explored.

Against this wider context, Claire and Sophia's institutional locations were distinct yet connected. Claire was employed full-time at a large national ELC chain in Shanghai. Her centre operated with standardised teaching packages, centrally designed slides and pacing guides, and close monitoring of teaching performance. As a teacher in a first-tier city, she worked with students whose families invested heavily in overseas study, and managerial discussions frequently revolved around brand reputation, score statistics and cross-branch consistency.

Sophia, by contrast, worked as a part-time instructor across several small to medium-sized ELCs in a provincial city. These centres offered IELTS and general English courses but lacked the unified systems characteristic of larger chains. Moving between institutions with different materials and course structures, she often adapted quickly to varying teaching contexts and student needs. This mobility exposed her to a wide range of everyday communicative texts and classroom resources, reinforcing her interest in connecting exam preparation with real-life English use. Her decentralised work arrangements also meant navigating diverse managerial expectations while maintaining her own pedagogical priorities. Together, these two institutional trajectories provide complementary windows onto how teachers negotiate exam-driven and commercially structured ELC environments in contemporary China.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

The study employed multiple data sources, each intentionally aligned with the conceptual framework to capture the microgenetic, ontogenetic, and cultural-historic dimensions of teachers' work (Vygotsky, 1930/1978). Over a six-month period, each participant produced ongoing reflective accounts documenting moment-to-moment instructional decisions and emergent tensions. These reflections functioned as microgenetic data that revealed how contradictions appeared and were negotiated in their teaching practices. Second, semi-structured interviews were conducted via Tencent Meeting: a two-hour interview with each teacher and a one-hour interview with centre management at each ELC, eliciting longer developmental trajectories (ontogenetic domain), personal and professional histories

(ontogenetic domain), and teachers' interpretations of broader institutional norms and test-oriented cultures (cultural-historic domain). Third, institutional documents such as lesson plans, task designs, and marked student work provided material evidence of how institutional rules, pacing pressures, and test-driven expectations shaped what teachers could do in practice. These documents grounded cultural-historic analysis in the organisational and sociocultural conditions framing everyday instruction (Nuttall & Brennan, 2016).

Data analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis. Throughout this process, analysis was informed by third-generation AT (Engeström, 2001), Bailey's (1996) washback framework, and Vygotsky's GM (1930/1978). Initial coding combined inductive attention to participants' accounts with sensitising concepts from AT, focusing on contradictions within and across components of teachers' teaching activity systems (i.e., subjects, objects, tools, rules, community, and division of labour). Bailey's (1996) washback framework directed analytic attention to how assessment-related pressures were enacted at both process and product levels of teaching practice. Theme development moved beyond descriptive patterning to identify recurrent washback-related contradictions and teachers' strategic responses. Drawing on the GM (Vygotsky, 1930/1978), analysis traced how these contradictions were experienced and navigated across microgenetic classroom interactions, teachers' ontogenetic trajectories, and the wider cultural-historical context. This integrated approach enabled an integrated examination of the contradictions TESOL teachers experience at ELCs due to washback effects in China (RQ1), and how teachers navigate these contradictions through teaching strategies (RQ2).

4. Findings

In this section, a joint activity system was constructed and analysed, which identified contradictions between the teacher's and the centre's PL activity systems. Each subsection illustrates how these contradictions triggered the teacher's adapted pedagogy to navigate the contractions in teaching, thereby addressing the RQs. Table 1 provides an overview of the findings, which are presented in the following subsections.

Table 1
An overview of the findings

Case	Contradiction	Manifested tension	Teacher's strategic response
Claire	Object 1 **vs** Object 2	Supporting communicative language development **vs** exam-driven performance and profitability	Re-centering foundational language development
Sophia	Tool 1 **vs** Tool 2	The use of authentic teaching materials **vs** past papers	Mediated sequencing of instruction
	Rule 1 **vs** Object 2	Promoting intelligible communication **vs** raising students' exam-oriented achievement	

4.1. Claire's case

Claire's trajectory into ELT began with her decision to major in English. During her undergraduate studies, she participated in English camps, progressing from teaching assistant to project lead. These early roles introduced her to classroom management and intensive program design.

Her first full-time teaching role involved preparing adult learners for English self-study exams. Despite high pass rates, she became increasingly aware of recurring linguistic weaknesses, such as limited grammar control and weak text organisation, which she came to view as central barriers to learners' progress. This period reinforced her belief that durable exam success depends on underlying language competence. Having passed the IELTS exam and studied abroad in the UK, Claire later transitioned into IELTS teaching. Her overseas study experience, coupled with her personal understanding of the test, allowed her to refine her instructional techniques and develop a strong orientation toward short-term exam preparation courses while maintaining high standards for linguistic accuracy and structured writing.

4.1.1. Object 1 vs Object 2: The tension between supporting communicative language development and exam-driven performance and profitability

Claire's account reveals a fundamental mismatch between her pedagogical object of supporting students' communicative language development, and the centre's object of achieving rapid, measurable exam gains. Claire insisted that "only real language improvement can help students cope with IELTS" (Interview), noting that poor control of grammar, limited vocabulary range, and weak textual organisation were the real barriers to progress (Alehegn & Qudah, 2025). She explained, "If students don't fix these foundations, any score increase will be unstable" (Interview). For Claire, effective IELTS teaching required slow, developmental strengthening rather than short-term score optimisation (Trenkic & Hu, 2021).

At the institutional level, the washback effect reconfigured priorities. From the product dimension of Bailey's (1996) framework, the centre strengthened curriculum standardisation to produce predictable score outcomes (Cushing, 2021). Claire was required to follow tightly structured lesson scripts and pacing guides (Fig. 2), as shown in the internal training notice outlining prescribed units, lesson plan templates, and standardised materials. A centre manager confirmed that standardisation helped "ensure consistent score performance across teachers, especially when new teachers join" (Interview). Standardisation thus worked to narrow the performance gap between novice and experienced teachers, aligning with the exam-driven expectations embedded in high-stakes testing.

Yet this move toward uniform teaching also carried a less publicly articulated function. One centre manager suggested, "standardisation shifted students' reliance away from individual teachers and toward the centre's product (i.e., the curriculum package itself)" (Interview). By anchoring student experience in a replicable instructional system, the centre mitigated the risk of teacher turnover causing student attrition, safeguarding enrolment continuity. Thus, while standardisation ostensibly served a

score-related object, it simultaneously supported the centre's broader commercial aim of sustaining profitability and stability (Buchanan et al., 2019).

At its core, Claire's narrative illuminates a structural contradiction between competing objects across activity systems. Her commitment to cultivating students' long-term communicative competence contrasts with the centre's pursuit of rapid score gains. Yet the centre's object extended beyond exam performance: embedded within its practices was a deeper commercial imperative to maintain enrolment continuity. This dual object shaped a teaching culture prioritising efficiency and test-oriented outcomes over students' developmental learning (Guo & Beckett, 2012). Claire captured this contradiction succinctly, "what I hope for is genuine language use, but what the system rewards is quick evidence of progress" (Self-reflection). The collision of these pedagogical, exam-centred, and commercial objects constrained the space for Claire to enact her values, revealing how teachers' intentions can be reshaped by broader institutional imperatives (Alehegn & Qudah, 2025).

4.1.2. Navigating the contradiction through re-centering foundational language development

Faced with the structural contradiction, Claire developed situated strategies to negotiate institutional expectations while sustaining her pedagogical commitment. Rather than accepting the exam-oriented logic at face value, she treated the standardised curriculum as "a necessary but insufficient baseline for meaningful learning" (Self-reflection). Her approach revealed how teachers mobilise personal histories and pedagogical values to navigate contradictions within the activity systems (Zhou et al., 2025).

From an ontogenetic perspective, Claire's linguistic training and professional background shaped her orientation toward foundational competence. As an English major with overseas study and extensive teaching experience, she held strong beliefs about grammatical awareness and textual development as prerequisites for authentic communication. This informed her teaching decisions when she observed that "students' linguistic foundations are weak, so I have to teach grammar again, even when students question why we need to cover things supposedly learned in junior school" (Interview). Her insistence was rooted in her long-standing understanding of effective language development (Alehegn & Qudah, 2025). Her ontogenesis enabled her to prioritise linguistic growth even within a high-stakes exam context (Riemenschneider et al., 2021), indicating that washback does not operate uniformly as a constraining force (Bailey, 1996); rather, teachers' ontogenetic resources may reorient exam-related pressures away from short-term instrumentalism toward more developmental forms of teaching.

At the cultural-historic level, Claire's navigation was influenced by broader discourses surrounding overseas study and English as gatekeeping capital (Murray, 2018; Scott, 2020). She expressed concern that insufficient linguistic grounding would leave students "unable to follow lectures, discussions or everyday communication once overseas" (Self-reflection). This view reflected the sociocultural expectation that English learning should prepare students for real academic participation rather than short-term score gains (Trenkic & Hu, 2021). In this sense, Claire's professional identity was historically

and culturally embedded in China's English-medium learning aspirations, allowing her to justify pedagogical choices that exceeded institutional score-driven imperatives.

Microgenetically, Claire engaged in subtle pedagogical negotiation that re-centred language development within the constraints of standardised lessons. While required to follow preset slides, she strategically repurposed mandated content by introducing selected texts, language-analysis tasks that foregrounded how grammar functions in communication, rather than rehearsing test techniques. She explained to students that grammar helps "express themselves clearly and understand others in real communication," framing it as a resource for academic participation and everyday interaction, rather than a test-oriented skill (Alehegn & Qudah, 2025). This shifted classroom discourse from short-term performance to long-term linguistic growth, enabling exam results to become, in her words, "a natural outcome when students' real ability improves" (Self-reflection). These adjustments represent pedagogical agency (Toom et al., 2015) operating within institutional constraints. However, this agency remained contingent and fragile, sustained only if it did not openly disrupt exam-oriented accountability structures (Lockton et al., 2019). The case thus highlights both the possibilities and limits of teacher agency under intensified washback.

4.2. Sophia's case

Sophia's trajectory into ELT was shaped by a long-standing fascination with language and communication, as well as her experience studying abroad. During university, she participated in English clubs and informal teaching activities, gradually discovering that she enjoyed helping learners express themselves and make sense of language in everyday contexts. These early experiences cultivated her preference for interactive, student-centred instruction and strengthened her confidence in creating engaging learning environments.

After graduation, Sophia worked across several private education settings, including children's English classes and university-level tutoring. Exposure to diverse learner groups reinforced her belief that language should be connected to real social life rather than taught solely through textbooks.

Her move into IELTS teaching was encouraged by colleagues who recognised her strong rapport with learners. Although initially unfamiliar with the test format, she observed experienced teachers and gradually formed her own approach. Over time, she became increasingly aware of pressures that students faced regarding overseas study and high-stakes testing, which deepened her empathy for learners and informed her teaching priorities.

4.2.1. Tool 1 vs Tool 2: The tension between the use of authentic teaching materials and past papers

Sophia's account reveals a contradiction between competing instructional tools: those she regarded as pedagogically meaningful for language development and those institutionally privileged for exam preparation. Rather than centring on teachers' intentions or institutional goals alone, this contradiction was enacted through the everyday selection of classroom materials. In Sophia's practice, teaching tools became a key mediational site where divergent understandings of effective instruction were negotiated.

Sophia consistently attempted to incorporate what she called “authentic materials” (Interview), such as supermarket brochures, advertising leaflets, film clips and elements of popular culture, so students could encounter English “as used in real life rather than only in exam questions” (Interview). She explained, “we have real materials, not only textbooks” (Self-reflection), suggesting a deliberate pedagogical orientation toward meaning and cultural connection (Cross, 2010). Such materials provided opportunities for students to notice how language constructs meaning in everyday communication, thereby strengthening communicative capacity rather than merely improving test-taking skills (Cross, 2010; Riemenschneider et al., 2021). She emphasised that “students will eventually have to use English in real contexts overseas; if they only focus on exam formats, they will struggle with real communication,” highlighting her commitment to longer-term linguistic development over immediate score gains.

However, the centre prioritised repetitive use of past papers as the core instructional tool. Past papers were treated as reliable, efficient resources for exam preparation, based on the assumption that repeated exposure to test formats would lead to stable score improvements across cohorts (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017), foregrounding the product dimension of washback (Bailey, 1996) and marginalising learning processes that do not convert neatly into short-term evidence. One centre manager shared that “the centre often justified the repeated use of past papers by claiming they were the most direct route to score improvement” (Interview), indicating how deeply the exam-driven logic had been internalised by management (Ghaleb, 2024). From this perspective, materials functioned primarily as instruments for test rehearsal rather than as resources for language development (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017). Within this framing, authentic materials were considered pedagogically interesting but insufficiently aligned with exam requirements. Sophia described feeling obliged to “keep past papers in the lesson because the centre expects quick results” (Self-reflection) illustrating how institutional priorities shaped teachers’ choice of tools and constrained possibilities for developmental pedagogy.

4.2.2. Rule 1 vs Object 2: The tension between promoting intelligible communication and raising students’ exam-oriented achievement

Sophia’s narrative also reveals a contradiction between her own pedagogical rule regarding pronunciation and the centre’s score-oriented object. She positioned pronunciation primarily as a means of intelligible communication and mutual understanding, rather than as a target of precise phonetic reproduction. As she explained, “as long as the meaning is clear, it is fine. Having a bit of personal style is not a problem” (Interview), indicating her emphasis on intelligibility rather than native-like accuracy. From her perspective, pronunciation was embedded in communication and identity, rather than in standardised norms (Levis & Sonsaat, 2017). Such an orientation aligns with scholarship that conceptualises pronunciation as a socially situated communicative resource, where variation does not necessarily impede meaning-making and may, instead, index legitimate speaker identity (Eckert, 2018). In this sense, Sophia’s pedagogical rule positioned pronunciation within a broader developmental and sociolinguistic framework, rather than as a discrete technical skill.

However, the centre's object, shaped by high-stakes testing discourse (Guo & Beckett, 2012), privileged correct pronunciation and standard accents as indicators of speaking proficiency. From a washback perspective (Bailey, 1996), this orientation foregrounded the product dimension of assessment, where pronunciation was valued primarily for its contribution to measurable score outcomes. As one centre manager explained, teachers were expected to prioritise precise articulation and correct phonetic forms because "improving pronunciation is closely linked to speaking scores" (Interview), revealing how assessment-oriented rationales governed pedagogical expectations (Sawyer, 2011), positioning pronunciation as a visible and assessable component of performance. Under this score-driven object, pronunciation became a technical target to be corrected and rehearsed, rather than a communicative practice situated in real-world use (Eckert, 2018). Such a framing exemplifies how washback can narrow the pedagogical function of language features, privileging forms that are legible to assessment regimes while marginalising dimensions of use, identity, and interaction that are less easily quantified (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017).

From an activity-theoretical perspective (Engeström, 1993; 2001), this contradiction was not merely pedagogical but structural, reflecting competing definitions of what counts as legitimate language knowledge and effective teaching. Sophia's stance represented a shift away from exam-conditioned norms toward communicative legitimacy embedded in mutual understanding, whereas the institutional object prioritised linguistic accuracy because of its alignment with assessment outcomes. Critically, this contradiction highlights how washback does not simply influence what is taught, but reshapes the epistemic status of language itself, reducing pronunciation to a set of correctable units rather than a dynamic resource for interaction (Levis & Sonsaat, 2017). While Sophia's reframing sustained a developmental orientation within a score-driven environment, it also remained constrained by the centre's accountability structures. This underscores the uneven and negotiated nature of pedagogical agency under intensified washback, as experienced and enacted by teachers as key participants (Bailey, 1996).

4.2.3. Navigating the contradiction through mediated sequencing of instruction

Under the process-level influence of washback (Bailey, 1996), Sophia's teaching became a continual act of mediation in which she sought to preserve her communicative orientation while working through institutionally mandated tools and assessment expectations. Rather than opposing exam preparation outright, she navigated both tool- and rule-related contradictions by reorganising how instructional resources and pedagogical emphases were sequenced and combined in practice.

At the level of teaching tools, Sophia did not position authentic materials for past papers. Instead, she strategically embedded them alongside exam-oriented resources as a way of reshaping classroom participation. She described using such materials as "a way of opening up the class" (Self-reflection), noting that they "make the lesson more meaningful, even if the course is still exam-focused" (Self-reflection). In Sophia's account, authentic resources, such as brochures, film clips and popular culture

texts, could function as entry points that “bring language back to real life” (Interview) without directly challenging the institutional requirement for past-paper delivery. In this configuration, authenticity was positioned not as an alternative curriculum, but as an initial moment through which communicative aims could be quietly sustained (Cushing, 2021).

A similar logic was evident in her approach to pronunciation. Sophia described how she would “first focus on being understood in order to build confidence” (Interview), and only later guide learners toward “the pronunciation the exam needs” (Interview). In her narrative, communicative intelligibility functioned as an initial mediational tool (Riemenschneider et al., 2021), enabling learners to participate meaningfully before being directed toward the standardised pronunciation emphasised by the centre. Sophia explained this as a necessary staging: “If they don’t feel confident, then talking about ‘correct pronunciation’ does not help; but later, we can still work on what the exam wants” (Self-reflection). Such temporal layering reveals a microgenetic process in which communicative rules and exam requirements emerge sequentially rather than simultaneously, allowing Sophia to preserve her principles while gradually accommodating the institutional object.

From a genetic perspective, such positioning reflected a developmental process shaped by Sophia’s earlier pedagogical experiences and beliefs (Vygotsky, 1930/1978). Drawing on a professional trajectory grounded in meaning-oriented instruction, she explained that her pedagogical practices could appear “as supplementary work for students who want more” (Interview), suggesting a tactical relocation of such work to the margins of the standard curriculum (Cushing, 2021). Through this repositioning, both authentic materials and communicative pronunciation practices were sustained within an exam-driven instruction. This strategy allowed her to implement what she valued while leaving the core exam materials intact. In this way, her teaching philosophy was strategically reconfigured through accommodation, illustrating how her ontogenetic history mediated the present activity without directly confronting the centre’s object (Zhou et al., 2025).

5. Discussion

This study conceptualises negative washback not as a discrete external influence but as an organising institutional logic (Göktürk Sağlam, 2018) that frames teaching activity in commercial ELCs. In Bailey’s (1996) framework, washback operates simultaneously through participants, processes, and products: teachers become accountable actors whose work is evaluated through exam-related indicators; instructional processes are compressed through pacing, coverage, and routinisation (Cushing, 2021; Ghaleb, 2024); and pedagogical products are redefined as auditable outputs aligned with test formats. Viewed through AT (Engeström, 2001), these dynamics intensify contradictions between teachers’ pedagogical objects and institutions’ exam- and market-driven priorities (Buchanan et al., 2019), rendering teaching a site of ongoing negotiation within interacting activity systems.

Across both cases, such contradictions were not merely constraints but conditions under which teachers enacted adaptive forms of agency (Zhou et al., 2025). Teachers did not reject exam-oriented demands

outright; instead, they reorganised their instructional strategies, for example by adjusting lesson sequencing to preserve elements of developmental language teaching. These responses show how contradictions become generative forces for development, prompting innovative efforts to manage institutional contradictions (Engeström, 2001): they expanded local possibilities for action without transforming the institutional object itself. Therefore, contradictions operated productively at the micro level, even as they remained structurally unresolved at the organisational level (Smith & Worsfold, 2013).

The GM (Vygotsky, 1930/1978) further illuminates how such navigation becomes possible. Ontogenetically, teachers' accumulated histories (Alehegn & Qudah, 2025), such as professional beliefs about language development and prior teaching experiences shaped how institutional pressures were interpreted and responded to. Microgenetically, these resources were mobilised in moment-to-moment pedagogical decisions that enabled teachers to deliver instruction they perceived as effective and professionally meaningful (Davis & Vehabovic, 2017). However, these processes unfolded within a broader cultural-historical context characterised by neoliberal governance of English education (Murray, 2018; Scott, 2020), where exam performance and commercial viability define institutional success (Guo & Beckett, 2012). From this perspective, teachers' adaptability should not be romanticised as purely emancipatory. Rather, teachers' agentive responses also sustain the system by enabling exam-oriented institutions to function smoothly without addressing the structural contradictions at their core (Lockton et al., 2019). Teacher agency thus emerges as simultaneously resistant and productive: it creates spaces for pedagogical meaning-making while absorbing and redistributing institutional pressures (Lockton et al., 2019).

6. Conclusion

This study examined how TESOL teachers in China's commercial ELCs experience and navigate contradictions arising from exam-related washback effects (Bailey, 1996; Cheng, 2017). Drawing on two cases, the findings demonstrate that exam-oriented accountability structures create enduring tensions between teachers' pedagogical commitments to meaningful language development and institutional definitions of effective teaching grounded in exam alignment and measurable performance. Rather than producing simple compliance or resistance, these contradictions shaped teachers' everyday work as sites of ongoing negotiation (Engeström, 2001), where pedagogical principles were sustained through adaptive organisation of instructional priorities and resources (Whittingham & Hoffman, 2020).

The study makes three key contributions. For researchers, it offers fine-grained evidence of how exam-related washback (Bailey, 1996) is enacted at the level of TESOL classroom work in commercial ELCs, extending washback research beyond macro policy accounts by integrating AT (Engeström, 2001) and the GM (Vygotsky, 1930/1978) to trace contradictions across teachers' microgenetic, ontogenetic, and cultural-historical domains. For ELC leaders, the findings clarify how accountability practices and curriculum control shape teachers' pedagogical possibilities, suggesting that teaching quality cannot be reduced to visible exam coverage alone and that space for pedagogical negotiation is central to sustainable improvement (Engeström, 2001). For teachers, the analysis renders structural pressures

explicit and provides language to interpret challenges as systemic rather than personal (Molla & Nolan, 2020), highlighting practical modes of navigation, such as proportional adjustment and temporal sequencing, that support agency without requiring outright resistance.

The study is limited by its focus on two qualitative cases selected for their analytic richness, yet the findings do not represent the full diversity of China's for-profit English education sector. In addition, the six-month period of reflective accounts collection captures the teachers' moment-to-moment contradictions and navigational strategies but is less able to trace longer-term developmental change over time. Future research could examine a wider range of ELC contexts and adopt longitudinal designs to explore how teachers' navigational strategies evolve under shifting institutional conditions.

Declarations

Declaration of competing interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Ethics approval

for this study was obtained from the relevant Human Research Ethics Committee. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to their participation in the study.

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Author Contribution

Dan Zhou: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - original draft, review, & editing, Visualisation, Project administration.Shengkai Yin: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - review, & editingYiqing Yuan: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Formal analysis, Investigation, Data curation, Writing - review, & editingHelin Yang: Conceptualisation, Methodology, Data collection and analysis -Writing - review, & editing

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Figures

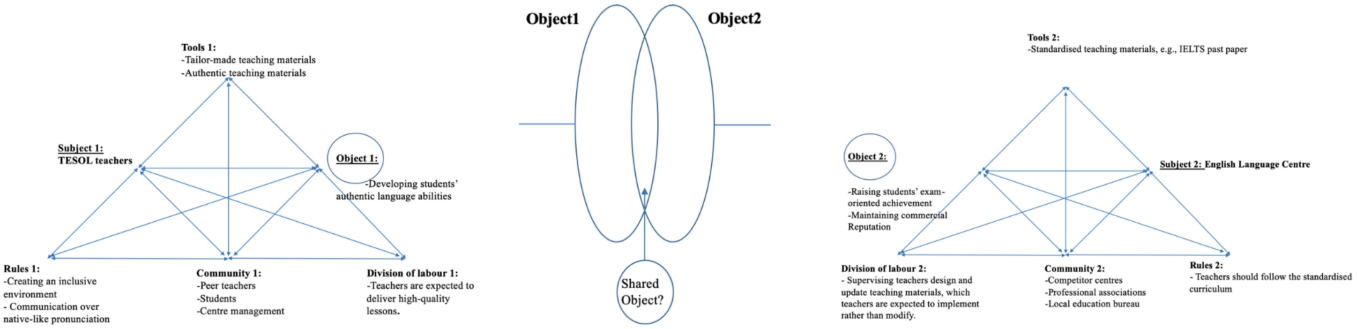


Figure 1

An example of a joint activity system for TESOL teachers' instructional practices at an ELC in China (adapted from Engeström, 2001).



Figure 2

Training notification email with attached standardised institutional materials, such as IELTS skill summaries, lesson plan templates, and unit planning templates.