

**EFL TEACHERS' COGNITION AND PRACTICES
OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN TEACHING OF
READING IN CHINA**

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**EFL TEACHERS' COGNITION AND PRACTICES
OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN TEACHING OF
READING IN CHINA**

by

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CELSC	College English Listening and Speaking Class
CEIRC	College English Intensive Reading Class
CORI	Concept-oriented Reading Instruction
EE	Educational Equity
EFL	English as a Foreign Language
ELL	English Language Learners
ELT	English Language Teaching
ICT	Information and Communication Technology
MOE	Ministry of Education
TESOL	Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Developmental Goal
UNESCO	The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization

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KOGNITIF GURU EFL DAN AMALAN EKUITI PENDIDIKAN DALAM PENGAJARAN MEMBACA DI CHINA

ABSTRAK

Ekuiti pendidikan (EE) dilihat sebagai suatu tema yang penting dalam Matlamat Pembangunan Lestari 2030 di mana mempunyai perkaitan dengan pendidikan bahasa Inggeris. Pengaplikasian EE di dalam kelas yang melibatkan kursus membaca adalah penting dalam pendidikan bahasa Inggeris bagi peringkat kolej di China. Walau bagaimanapun, guru Bahasa Inggeris di China tidak mengikuti EE dalam pengajaran mereka dan persepsi mereka terhadap pengajaran membaca sering diputarbelitkan. Oleh kerana pengajaran guru berkaitan dengan kognisi mereka dipengaruhi oleh faktor pengalaman dan kontekstual, maka kedua-dua elemen ini sangat penting untuk dikenal pasti. Kajian literatur berkaitan dengan kognisi dan amalan guru EFL di China terhadap EE yang kurang dan tidak konsisten yang dilaporkan dalam kajian sebelumnya menyebabkan perlunya kajian ini dijalankan. Oleh itu, berdasarkan Kerangka Kognisi Guru Bahasa oleh Borg, Teori Keadilan Rawls' dan Kerangka Arahan Membaca CORI oleh Guthrie et al., kajian ini bertujuan untuk meneroka kognisi EE dalam kalangan guru-guru EFL di kolej terhadap kursus membaca di China, kesepaduan kognisi dan amalan EE mereka, faktor pengalaman dan kontekstual yang mempengaruhi amalan EE mereka serta mengenal pasti strategi saksama guru-guru terhadap amalan pengajaran dan cara membangunkan amalan tersebut. Pendekatan kualitatif interpretatif digunakan melibatkan dua protokol temu bual semi struktur, pemerhatian dalam bilik darjah dan dokumen rancangan pengajaran. Sampel kajian terdiri daripada 10 orang peserta yang dipilih berdasarkan persampelan kriteria dan persampelan bertujuan. Data dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik.

Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa kognisi EE guru dalam arahan membaca berdasarkan pengetahuan tentang EE, kepercayaan dalam meningkatkan EE dan pemikiran pedagogi dalam mempraktikkan EE adalah komprehensif. Walau bagaimanapun, amalan guru-guru adalah tidak bersesuaian dengan kognisi mereka disebabkan oleh pengaruh faktor pengalaman (persekolahan, latihan dan pengalaman pengajaran) dan faktor kontekstual (perbezaan individu pelajar, iklim bilik darjah, konteks sekolah, sistem pendidikan, dan konteks sosio-budaya). Sementara itu, tiga jenis strategi yang adil (strategi instruksional, strategi kognitif, dan strategi afektif) yang diamalkan oleh tiga peserta kajian dikenal pasti. Tambahan pula, terdapat lima kaedah ditemui bagi membangunkan strategi ini iaitu mengenal pasti dan mengutamakan keperluan pelajar, menghubungkan objektif pengajaran dengan aktiviti yang mengasyikkan, memberi peluang kepada pelajar untuk berkembang dalam kemahiran yang komprehensif, memberi sokongan yang sama rata dan melakukan refleksi terhadap isu ekuiti untuk mengoptimumkan strategi yang adil. Kajian ini memberikan pandangan yang bermakna terhadap guru-guru EFL mengenai kognisi guru dan amalan EE dalam arahan membaca serta mencadangkan kerangka berorientasikan ekuiti bagi memudahkan amalan guru. Cadangan kajian lanjutan bagi kajian ini adalah mengenal pasti aspek-aspek lain dalam kognisi guru terhadap EE, kesan daripada faktor berpengaruh terhadap kognisi dan amalan EE. Dalam pada itu, kesan strategi ekuiti juga harus dikaji dengan lebih lanjut berdasarkan latar belakang budaya yang berbeza untuk meningkatkan ekuiti dalam pendidikan.

EFL TEACHERS' COGNITION AND PRACTICES OF EDUCATIONAL EQUITY IN TEACHING OF READING IN CHINA

ABSTRACT

Educational equity (EE), seen as an important theme in the *2030 Sustainable Development Goals*, relates closely to English language education. Promoting EE in the actual classroom, especially in the main reading course, is an integral part of College English language education in China. However, EFL teachers in China do not practice EE well and they often hold distorted cognition of teaching of reading. Since teachers' practices are related to their cognition and influenced by experiential and contextual factors, it is critical to recognize the vital links among these elements. The scant literature on examining EFL teachers' cognition and practices concerning EE in the Chinese context and the inconsistency reported in the previous studies necessitate the study. Therefore, framed by Borg's language teacher cognition, Rawls' theory of justice, and Guthrie et al.'s CORI framework, this study aimed to explore Chinese college EFL reading teachers' cognitions of EE, the consistency of their cognition and practices of EE, the experiential and contextual factors that affect their practices of EE as well as to identify teachers' equitable strategies and the way they developed them. An interpretive qualitative approach was adopted and the data from two semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and lesson plan documents of 10 participants selected by purposive and criterion sampling were analyzed through thematic analysis. The findings revealed teachers' cognition of EE in teaching of reading in terms of knowledge of EE, beliefs in enhancing EE, and pedagogical thinking in practicing EE was rather comprehensive. However, teachers' practices were not in high consistency with their cognition, suggesting the influence of

experiential factors (schooling, training, and teaching experiences), and contextual factors (students' individual differences, classroom climate, school context, education system, and socio-cultural context). Meanwhile, three types of equitable strategies (instructional strategies, cognitive strategies, and affective strategies) practiced by three participants were identified. Additionally, five ways they developed these strategies, namely, identifying and prioritizing students' needs, connecting teaching objectives to immersive activities, empowering students to thrive in comprehensive skills, equalizing support for all, and reflecting on equity issues to optimize equitable strategies, were found. The study provides valuable insights into EFL teachers' cognitions and practices of EE in teaching of reading and proposes an equity-oriented framework to facilitate teachers' practices. As for future studies, the wider aspects of teachers' cognition of EE, the impact of influential factors on cognition and practices of EE, as well as the effect of equitable strategies should be further investigated from diverse cultural contexts to help enhance equity in the educational arena.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

Educational equity (EE) contains two intertwined dimensions—fairness for “achieving the educational potential” and inclusion for “ensuring a basic minimum standard of education for all” (OECD, 2008, p.2) regardless of learners’ identity markers such as gender, race, color and socioeconomic status. Seen as the cornerstone of social justice (Hansen & Gustafsson, 2019; Mascareñaz, 2020; Wen et al., 2022), EE is the common pursuit of humankind and an essential indicator of the civilization level in a country. As Rawls (2005) who developed the Theory of Justice argues, to obtain social justice in the educational context, all should be given equal liberty and opportunities regardless of socioeconomic disparities and the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged should be guaranteed. According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2008) and many scholars (Komatsu et al., 2020; Yu & Ma, 2022; Zeeshan et al., 2022), sustainable development of education cannot be attained without EE.

Furthermore, the concept of equity holds significant importance within the framework of “Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4,” a specific facet dedicated to “Quality Education” as outlined in the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable (United Nations, 2015). The main objective of this goal is to ensure inclusive and equitable quality education, while also fostering opportunities for lifelong learning for everyone. This goal inherently recognizes the crucial role that education plays in achieving sustainable development, given its capacity to empower individuals, nurture human potential, and drive economic growth and societal progress. In response to the imperative for a more fair and inclusive education system that benefits both individuals

and societies, the central government of China has also integrated the SDGs into the nation's overarching development strategy. This is particularly evident in China's endeavors to contribute to the realization of SDG4, which concentrates on ensuring high-quality education for all (Li et al., 2022; Li & Rao, 2023).

Under the backdrop of SDG4, English language education relates closely to EE (Erling et al., 2020; Kubota, 2019; Murray, 2020; Poteau & Winkle, 2021), bringing opportunities both for learners and society. Ensuring equal educational opportunities for all English learners is essential to their academic development (Johnson, 2022; Lachance et al., 2019). With the surging of English language learners (ELLs) worldwide, long-standing inequities in English language teaching (ELT) are undoubtedly a critical issue that needs to be adequately addressed (Fagan et al., 2022; Hult et al., 2018). Therefore, promoting a more democratic, equitable, and egalitarian future for all in actual classroom teaching is an integral part of English language education (Hult et al., 2018; Yao, 2021; Yi & Bai, 2022). However, the reality remains bleak and blurred since the quality of English language education is often poor and unsatisfactory (Hamid & Erling, 2016; UNESCO, 2014), reflecting in the disappointing fact that little progress has been achieved toward a more equitable and inclusive direction in the policies and practices regarding curricula, instruction, and teacher education (Kubota, 2019).

Among the four English language skills in English language education, reading proficiency considered the key to knowledge (Bernardo et al., 2021; Wu & Xiao, 2014), can be a positive force to promote equity and social justice in the global context (Blackledge, 2000; Shannon, 2017; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015). Reading, which involves critical perception and metacognition, is an essential skill for acquiring

knowledge and propelling human development (Akinola 2021; Guo, 2022; Han, 2021; Wu et al., 2022). Reading education which aims to conduce to a radical departure from traditional practices to be more equitable for all learners should take teachers' teaching into account (Buechel, 2022; Lucas & Schechter, 1992; Tortorelli et al., 2021; Wetzel et al., 2020). Meanwhile, researchers (Lucas & Schechter, 1992; Mathes & Torgesen, 2000; Reichenberg, 2020; Skerrett et al., 2018) have emphasized the importance of promoting equity in reading classes and called for English reading teachers should be equity-oriented when performing instructional practices, just as Guthrie et al. (2004) who developed the Concept-Oriented Reading Instruction (CORI) framework advocate, teachers are required to create a positive and supportive classroom environment for every student to learn reading.

Contextualizing Rawls' two principles which consist of the greatest equal liberty principle, equality of opportunity principle and difference principle, EE in the teaching of reading in EFL context means to empower all students with due liberty to choose what and how they want to learn, provide diverse teaching materials to sustain the interest of all the students, vary scaffolding-oriented reading strategies to facilitate their in-depth reading and offer equitable opportunities for hands-on literacy activities and group collaboration so that all of them can succeed in improving the comprehensive reading skills regardless of the diverse identity markers such as gender, race, color and socioeconomic status. Yet still, inequities exist in today's English reading education since many teachers fail to fulfill the learning needs of culturally and linguistically diverse students (Conrad, 2022; Wetzel et al., 2020).

The key to the equity and fairness of the education process lies in the potent force—the teachers (Boyd, 2017; Crawford-Garrett, 2017; Lee et al., 2016; Liao et al.,

2022; Milligan et al., 2020; Murray, 2020). The goal of an equitable educational context is for teachers to create fair and inclusive learning environments to help students academically, socially, and emotionally engaged in a complex and democratic society (Cochran-Smith, 2020) so that even marginalized and disadvantaged students can flourish in equitable learning experiences (Poekert et al., 2020). However, EFL teachers' instructional practices are blamed for straying from equity (Conrad, 2022; Wetzel et al., 2020) and they are identified as not equity-minded when performing classroom practices (Chen, 2020; Chen & Vibulphol, 2019; Li et al., 2019; Xiong & Xiong, 2017). Since teachers' practices are closely related to their cognition (Borg, 2003; 2006; Li, 2020; López-Barrios et al., 2021) and at the same time influenced by experiential and contextual factors (Bagheri & East, 2021; Borg, 2006; Wei & Cao, 2020), their practices of EE can also be subjected to these three elements, thus presenting practice-cognition inconsistencies (Gong et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020; Zhu & Shu, 2017). Given the significant role EFL teachers play in implementing EE in teaching of reading, it is worth investigating in-depth the interrelationship between teachers' cognition, classroom practices as well as experiential and contextual factors.

1.2 Background of the Study

Though some progress in terms of EE has been achieved in China over the past decades (Xue & Li, 2021a), how to promote equity remains a major concern in the current educational system and reform (Hallinger & Liu, 2016; Lin, 2018; Liu, 2022; Xue & Li, 2021b). Since the reform and opening up, education in China has undergone rapid development in ongoing efforts directed toward equity and excellence. Notably, the concept of excellence in the educational context relates not only to academic

achievement and potential but is also now more linked to the degree of equity reflected in the educational system (Teng et al., 2019). Therefore, equity and excellence are not independent but inseparable, just as the OECD report (Andreas, 2014) states, excellence without equity may widen social and economic inequities, and equity at the cost of excellence is an empty goal. Pursuing equity and excellence in education requires joint efforts from various levels in the educational system: national level to formulate macroscopic educational policies, school level to integrate and implement the policies, and classroom level to cater to the inherent diversity of all learners (Avermaet et al., 2011). China, holding the same vision for achieving equity and excellence in education (Li & Xue, 2022; Zhang, 2017), has dedicated much to propelling education development in aspects of reducing inequities and enhancing educational quality and attainment (Guo et al., 2019; Yang et al., 2014).

According to China's State Council (2017), EE is the most urgent and sensitive issue in current China's education system. The strong emphasis on EE is reflected clearly in a series of policies repolishing the curriculum, syllabus, and teaching methods formulated by the Chinese government and the Ministry of Education (MOE). To dismantle the obstacles of EE, the *Outline of the National Mid- and Long-Term Plan for Educational Reform and Development 2010–2020* issued earlier by the Chinese MOE announces the promotion of equity as the foremost policy for the nation and phases in multiple strategies to promote EE (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2010). Besides, it clarifies that teachers are the critical links to ensure the success of educational reform. Later, China's *Education Modernization 2035* also highlights the great importance of guaranteeing equity, promoting inclusive education in full force, and enhancing teachers' professional morality and teaching ability (Central Committee of the Communist Party of China & State Council, 2019). Under such a backdrop,

more importance has been attached to improving the quality of the Chinese teaching force (Lee et al., 2016; Sargent & Xiao, 2018; Wang & Guo, 2022). Accordingly, providing students with proper education according to their aptitudes and empowering them with equal educational opportunities are highlighted in the classroom teaching of Chinese teachers.

In China, improving EE in English language education for students at the tertiary level is of great importance. Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China (2018 Amendment) (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2018) emphasizes that every citizen should enjoy the equitable right to receive higher education. Higher education is crucial for promoting social equity (Yang, 2021). Therefore, considering the intimate relationship between EE and English language education, it is of great value to enhance equity in English language education for college students. In response to the country's affirmative initiatives on EE, Chinese universities have implemented a series of measures, such as promoting graded teaching (Han, 2022; He & Han, 2018; Ren & Wang, 2018a), eliminating unsuitable courses (low-level and exam-oriented) and advocating first-rate courses (high level and learner-centered) (Jin, 2019; Wu, 2018; Zeng, 2019) as well as implementing flipped classroom (Du, 2018; Li, 2018; Tang et al., 2022) to change the traditional one-size-fits-all model in ELT.

Teaching of reading plays a dominant role in Chinese college English teaching (Mo, 2020; Ren & Wang, 2018b, Renandya et al., 2015). The importance of reading is reflected in the objectives of the ELT syllabus *College English Curriculum Requirements* (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2020) which requires students to reach three levels (basic, improving, and developing levels) and emphasizes students' reading abilities. Accordingly, the English reading course, as a compulsory English

language course for non-English major students in almost all universities and colleges, has been long regarded as the bedrock of the College English curriculum (He, 2015; Qi & Wang, 2019; Wan, 2022). Reading comprehension is the key part of the most prevailing national English tests—College English Test Band 4 and Band 6 (hereafter CET tests), accounting for as high as 35% (Fu, 2020; Guo, 2022). As Lin (2019) asserts, all the English classes in China focus on reading comprehension. There is no doubt that for EFL learners in China at the tertiary level, reading ability is critically fundamental for its importance in enhancing students' comprehensive language competence (Qi et al., 2021; Zhou, 2017) and academic development (Jiang, 2015; Wan, 2022; Zhang & Zou, 2020). Thus, enabling EFL learners in China to achieve a high level of reading competence is considered the principal objective of College English Courses (Qian, 2018; Ren & Wang, 2018b).

Noticeably, the concept of equity is incorporated closely into the objectives of teaching of reading in universities and colleges across China. According to the newest version of *College English Curriculum Requirements* (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2020), the general requirement for reading is to attach great importance to the central position of students and develop students' English proficiency in a well-rounded way. Accordingly, in line with the core philosophy of the *College English Curriculum Requirements*, EFL reading teachers are thus required to cultivate their moral ethics to be equitable and inclusive, adhere to student-centered patterns instead of teacher-centered patterns, allow students to learn suited to their individual needs, give necessary guidance in teaching reading strategies as well as offer comprehensive and objective evaluation to all so that the steady progress and life-long learning of every student can be ensured.

In light of the pivotal role held by Chinese EFL reading teachers in the educational process, a growing consensus is emerging within the academic literature that they should not only serve as facilitators of language acquisition but also be cultivated as advocates for EE (Boyd, 2017; Guo et al., 2019; Ham, 2020). By dedicating themselves to equity and excellence in their teaching of reading, teachers can contribute significantly to enhancing EFL learners' reading motivation, promoting their reading comprehension, and facilitating their overall development. This necessitates a transformative notion that entails not only the implementation of pedagogical strategies to cater to varying learning needs but also the fostering of a dedicated commitment to prioritizing the central role of students. Han (2014) mentions that student-centeredness allows teachers' power and authority to be equitably shared with students. To take a departure from traditional teaching of EFL reading featured a "teacher-centered, examination-oriented, grammar and vocabulary-based method" approach (Ding, 2012, p.63), practices such as stratified teaching (Li et al., 2020), flipped classroom (Teng, 2017), production-oriented approach (Ren & Wang, 2018b) and drama-based pedagogy (Zhang, 2021) have been adopted to enable teachers transit from teacher-centeredness to student-centeredness by performing equitable practices such as providing effective teaching materials and scaffolding reading strategies according to students' diverse needs and interests as well as giving the equitable opportunities for students to talk and collaborate so as to develop their reading comprehension.

Then, how do EFL reading teachers in China develop their equitable practices? In Borg's framework (2006), teachers' practices are shaped by the interplay of teacher cognition, experiential factors (including schooling and professional experiences) and contextual factors defined as external forces beyond teachers' control in and outside

the classroom. In terms of teacher cognition, studies have found that EFL teachers' cognition is viewed as an influential force that can construct their classroom practices (Cheung & Hennebry-Leung, 2020; Wang & Ryan, 2020; Zhu & Shu, 2017), thereby impacting the academic performance of the learners (Gao et al., 2020; Kang & Cheng, 2014). Accordingly, teacher cognition of EE which encompasses components such as student-centered learning, advocacy for equity needs, and culturally responsive teaching (Nadelson et al., 2019; 2022a; 2022b) can facilitate teachers' equitable teaching and empower students to develop sustainably (Brinegar et al., 2018). Only when teachers become equity-conscious and keep equity gaps in their mindsets can they successfully address the inequity issues embedded in their practices (Martin-Kerr et al., 2022; Orfield, 2014; Walter, 2022). Since teacher knowledge, belief and pedagogical thinking are the three main constructs in the overarching concept of cognition (Borg, 2003, 2013; Calderhead, 1996), when contextualizing EFL teachers' equity-oriented cognition in teaching of reading in China, teachers' cognition of EE contains their knowledge of EE, their beliefs in enhancing EE, and their pedagogical thinking in practicing EE in teaching of reading.

Besides, through investigating Chinese EFL reading teachers' cognition, it is believed that the experiential factors which include teachers' previous schooling and professional experience have shaped their initial cognition, thus forming an intricate interplay between teachers' cognition and instructional practices (Ma & Luo, 2021). Numerous studies (Li, 2020; Gao et al., Mo, 2020; Ngo, 2018; Wei & Cao, 2020) have verified the impact of teachers' former experiences on their cognition and practices. Mo's (2020) study specifically reveals how distorted cognition on teaching reading among Chinese EFL teachers, arising from their personal educational experiences, could potentially worsen inequalities in the classroom environment.

Therefore, given the important role EFL teachers' former experiences play in forming their mental worlds and instructional practices towards EE, more scholarly attention should be paid to this aspect to reveal how these factors influence teachers' cognition and practices of EE in teaching of reading.

Furthermore, EFL reading teachers' cognition and practices in China are believed to be mediated by contextual factors that exist in and outside of the classroom. The intricate interplay between these contextual factors, encompassing social, psychological, and environmental dimensions, engenders a dynamic framework within which EFL reading teachers formulate and enact their cognitive processes and pedagogical strategies. Numerous research studies have delved into the exploration of teacher cognition (e.g., Chen & Vibulphol, 2019; Clark & Yu, 2022; Gao, 2020; Liu et al., 2019; Luo et al., 2019; Ma & Liu, 2022; Mo, 2020), revealing the impact of contextual factors on EFL reading teachers' cognition and practices to varying degrees, whether positively or negatively. These contextual factors identified included curriculum requirements, school context, and teacher development programmes (Luo et al., 2019) as well as local culture and limited resources (Wei & Cao, 2020). Consequently, due to the interplay of individualized experiential factors and uncontrollable contextual factors, EFL reading teachers' attention to and interpretation of EE will also be diverse, thus presenting different practices in teaching of reading.

To refine teaching strategies oriented by EE in Chinese higher education, EFL reading teachers should be equipped with an EE mindset when implementing classroom practices. To instruct students with equitable strategies, they should be more student-oriented to provide teaching based on what they feel beneficial to students (Hu & Baumann, 2014), such as empowering students with the liberty to choose what and

how they want to learn (Liu & Chen, 2018; Wang & Li, 2019; Xu & Kim, 2022), carefully selecting diverse reading materials to sustain the interest of students (Ferrer & Staley, 2016; Kung, 2019; Ren & Wang, 2018b), varying scaffolding-oriented reading strategies to facilitate the in-depth reading of every student (Li & Zhang, 2020; Shih et al., 2018; Yu, 2015) and providing all students with equitable rights and opportunities to be engaged in hands-on literacy activities and group collaboration to improve their motivation and engagement (Du & Liang, 2021; Qi et al., 2021; Sun, 2019). Consequently, EFL teachers in China who have the correct cognition of EE and integrate it into pedagogical instructions can genuinely address the increasingly urgent problem of moving toward EE in teaching of reading.

However, though some progress in terms of EE has been achieved in China over the past decades (Xue & Li, 2021a), how to promote equity remains a major concern in the current educational system and reform (Lin, 2018; Liu, 2022; Xue & Li, 2021b), especially in the teaching of reading (Wu, 2019). Given the fact that teachers' practices will be influenced by their cognition and influential factors, in the context of increasing demand for EE in teaching of EFL reading at the tertiary level, it is of great significance to investigate the dynamic associations between teachers' cognition and practices of EE to offer fresh and valuable insights into teaching of EFL reading and contribute to the existing body of knowledge.

1.3 Statement of the Problem

Though teachers should promote EE—one of the mandates in SDG4 and commit to equity (Hoang et al., 2022; Milligan et al., 2020; Sibanda, 2023), it is reported that EFL teachers in China do not practice EE well in their classroom teaching (Chen & Vibulphol, 2019; Li et al., 2019; Xiong & Xiong, 2017). The inequities in

their teaching of reading mainly manifest in giving uninteresting teaching materials against individual needs (Yi, 2021; Zhong & Kang, 2021), instructing ineffective reading strategies (Li et al., 2020; Li & Zhang, 2020; Qi et al., 2021), and depriving students of opportunities for hands-on activities and collaboration (Du & Guan, 2016; Guan, 2020; Tang, 2016; Yi & Bai, 2022). Such inequitable practices have caused a “reading crisis”, restraining the development of students’ English proficiency (Li, 2021; Zhang, 2012). Prior investigations (Hu & West, 2015; Wang, 2018; Mo, 2020) have highlighted a key underlying factor that contributes to the absence of equity in teachers’ practices—the entrenched exam-oriented paradigm within China’s educational system, which serves as a deterrent for Chinese EFL teachers to embrace equitable and inclusive practices within their reading classrooms.

In addition, empirical studies have further reported that teachers’ inequitable teaching has worsened the problem of dumb and deaf English and made the cooperative learning of students rarely happen in class (Fu, 2013; Mo, 2020; Yu, 2019), thus resulting in the inefficient and discouraging learning outcomes among students (Li, 2021; Mo, 2020; Ren & Wang, 2018b; Zhao & Zhu, 2012). As scholars (Guo, 2022; Sun & Zhang, 2018) argue, Chinese students’ reading abilities are far from satisfactory since students are unable to “read effectively, think independently, and develop their problem-solving abilities” (Zhao & Zhu, 2012, p.111). Correspondingly, this ineffective way of knowledge inculcation may continue to foster a larger achievement gap among students at different levels (Li et al., 2020; Wu, 2019).

To promote EE in teaching of EFL reading, the starting point is to understand teachers’ cognition pertaining to EE, yet a major concern among scholars and researchers is that a group of EFL teachers in China hold distorted cognition in

teaching reading (Mo, 2020; Xu & Li, 2012), being more self-centered instead of equity-oriented (Chen & Vibulphol, 2019; Du & Guan, 2016; Mo, 2020). In their cognition, improving teaching skills is far more critical than enhancing equity (Xu & Li, 2012) and teaching reading is emphasized because “reading skills were those used in the high-stakes tests rather than daily reading activities” (Mo, 2020, p.112). When projecting in teaching of EFL reading, teachers’ lack of equity-oriented mindset is mainly reflected in their dominance of the class and failure to understand learners’ needs (Du & Guan, 2016; Qi, 2021; Mo, 2020) and give them needed opportunities to practice and think critically (Wang et al., 2021; Zhou, 2018). It is conceivable that the challenge confronting EFL teachers in China in this transformational age is to form the correct cognition of EE and how to integrate it effectively into classroom practices.

In view of the importance of EE in facilitating students to thrive in individual development and promoting social justice, EFL reading teachers in China should hold correct cognition of EE and integrate it into teaching, however, little academic attention has been awarded to reveal what their equity-oriented cognition is. Though several foreign scholars (e.g., Brinegar et al., 2018; Dweck, 2010; Nadelson et al., 2019; 2022a; 2022b; Ramaley, 2014; Skerrett et al., 2018; Stenbridge, 2019) have attempted to reveal what equity-oriented cognition encompasses, however, in the Chinese context, studies on teacher cognition are conducted on a small-scale level, mainly centering on the content and features of teachers’ cognition (Gong et al., 2018; Li, 2020; Zheng, 2015) as well as the relationship between their cognition and practices (Lan & Lam, 2020; Sansom, 2020; Sun et al., 2020; Wang & Kokotsaki, 2018; Zhang et al., 2020), few studies have examined EFL teachers’ cognition about teaching of reading in China (Luo et al., 2019; Mo, 2020), especially EFL teachers from college-level (Gao & Bintz, 2019), let alone on EE within the field. Therefore,

further insights into revealing the nuanced and comprehensive knowledge about EFL reading teachers' cognition of EE are needed in Chinese context.

Another concern raised in the teacher cognition research is that the findings in extant literature about teacher cognition and practices are inconsistent (Zheng et al., 2022). Some researchers (e.g. Hajan et al., 2019; Morton & Gray, 2018; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017; Sugesti et al., 2020) believe EFL teachers' practices are the products of their cognition and reach a consensus that teachers' cognitive system acts as a crucial element that influences their decision-making process and pedagogical practices (Borg, 2003; Hajan et al., 2019; Öztürk & Gürbüz, 2017). By contrast, other studies claim that influenced by various experiential and contextual factors, there is often a mismatch between EFL teachers' practices and cognition (Gong et al., 2018; Luo et al., 2019; Wang et al., 2020; Zhu & Shu, 2017). Though Chinese teachers often self-report their concerns about the overall development of students' reading abilities, in reality, their practices are not in line with their cognition, as revealed by Ching (2018), Gao (2021), Gao and Bintz (2019) and Luo et al. (2019). Their practices in teaching of reading, as reported by Mo (2020), show that they focus more on training testing skills instead of students' overall development. To conclude, despite the impact of teacher cognition on practices can be undeniable, there are also salient findings indicating the practice-cognition mismatch. Therefore, an in-depth investigation into the dynamic associations between EFL reading teachers' cognition and practices of EE as well as the influencing factors at work is worthwhile.

Furthermore, as an important medium to promote equity and social justice (Blackledge, 2000; Shannon, 2017; Tunmer & Chapman, 2015), teaching of EFL reading is of great value in China (Gao et al., 2018; Han, 2021; Mo, 2020), yet

empirical studies in EE from a microscopic view discussing on the effective ways of developing and applying equitable strategies in the teaching of EFL reading in China are still in scarcity. To realize more equitable teaching of reading in the Chinese EFL context, the current reading pedagogy should be modified (Wilner, 2020) and equitable strategies should be implemented to maximize fairness and opportunities for everyone (Tanner, 2013). Although equitable strategies have been discussed in educational research studies (Bianchini et al., 2003; Cothorne, 2018; Maeng & Lee, 2015; Tanner, 2013), the related literature has only provided single-faceted or episodic views about how EFL teachers practice and develop their unique equitable strategies to make their teaching fair and inclusive. As Baker et al. (2019) point out, reading has important implications for EE, but literature about this field seems invisible and silent. Besides, there is scant literature to help the world understand the nature and dynamics of EE in the Chinese education context (Mu et al., 2013) and address the potential equity issues in the educational process (Wei, 2020). Taken together, the dearth of studies in this regard necessitates more scholarly attention to equity in the Chinese context of teaching of EFL reading.

As stated, since EFL teachers in China play a pivotal role in implementing EE, recognizing the vital links between their cognition and practice as well as other influential factors is critical to securing an inclusive and high-quality education for all English learners. However, their cognition and practices of EE in teaching of reading have been given little empirical attention and there exists a disjunction between teachers' cognition and practices. Therefore, this study, framed by Borg's framework of language teacher cognition, the tenets in Rawls' theory of justice, as well as Guthrie et al.'s CORI framework, aims to address the gap by exploring EFL teachers' EE-related cognition and practices in teaching of reading in China's higher education

system in a qualitative way to examine the relationship among teacher cognition, classroom practices and influencing factors in teaching of reading as well as the equitable strategies teachers employ and develop so as to generate an equity framework for EFL teachers to promote EE effectively in teaching of reading.

1.4 The Rationale of the Study

Though in general, research focus regarding EE has converted from examining educational reforms from a macro perspective to minimizing gaps across groups or subgroups from a micro perspective (Hoang, 2019), research on EE in China is still more concerned with the imbalance between urban and rural educational resources (Xue & Li, 2021b; Zhang & Zhou, 2021). However, this study shifts towards a more humanistic and innovative perspective by focusing on teachers who are the potent force in the course of guaranteeing equity in the educational process, aiming to shed light on people's understanding of what equity-oriented cognition and practices mean in teaching of EFL reading.

Besides, though teacher cognition has been a heavily-studied topic, most studies prefer to adopt cognitivist views while neglecting alternative perspectives (Burns et al., 2015). As Ngo (2018) states, the social dimensions of language teacher cognition are not paid due attention. Since the research on teacher cognition is sprawling yet unevenly distributed, this topic needs to be studied in newly emergent and interdisciplinary settings (Gao, 2014) with a holistic, complex, and insider view (Mo, 2020). Thus, delving into the realm of teachers' cognition from the equity perspective effectively bridges the gap arising from the deficiency in addressing the social dimension.

Furthermore, teaching of EFL reading is particularly valuable in China (Gao et al., 2018; Han, 2021; Mo, 2020), but the lack of empirical studies on EFL teachers' cognition and practices of EE in teaching of reading and the disjunction recognized between teachers' cognition and practices propel the researcher to look into the actual relationship between EFL teachers' equity-related cognition and practices so that fresh and valuable insights can be offered to the mainstream teacher cognition research.

Lastly, many scholars have expressed their concern about inequalities in the field of ELT and their desire to address them, yet the solutions are still far from shared (Yazan & Rudolph, 2018). Therefore, it is urgent to offer valuable suggestions to tackle the inequities existing in the teaching of EFL reading in the Chinese higher education context.

1.5 Research Objectives

This current study aimed to explore EFL teachers' EE-related cognition and practices in teaching of reading in China's higher education system to examine the relationship among teacher cognition, classroom practices and influencing factors in teaching of reading as well as the equitable strategies teachers employ and develop. Specifically, the study was guided by the following objectives:

1. To explore EFL teachers' cognition of educational equity in teaching of reading at the tertiary level in China.
2. To probe into the consistency of EFL teachers' cognition and practices of educational equity in teaching of reading.
3. To explore the experiential and contextual factors that affect EFL teachers' practices of educational equity in teaching of reading.
4. To investigate EFL teachers' equitable strategies in teaching of reading.

5. To examine the ways EFL teachers develop equitable strategies in teaching of reading.

1.6 Research Questions

1. What are the EFL teachers' cognitions of educational equity in teaching of reading at the tertiary level in China?

2. How consistent is EFL teachers' cognition and practices of educational equity in teaching of reading?

3. What are the experiential and contextual factors that affect EFL teachers' practices of educational equity in teaching of reading?

4. What are the EFL teachers' equitable strategies in teaching of reading?

5. How do EFL teachers develop equitable strategies in teaching of reading?

1.7 Significance of the Study

The findings of the study can be of great significance and novelty in the following aspects. For a start, the study, being in accord with the call for equitable and inclusive education advocated by the Chinese MOE, can help national education policy-makers reshape current education policies, perceptions, and practices with an equity lens and thus promote EE at a large scale in China. As is known, though numerous measures have been advocated to achieve EE, the reality is still far from the blueprint. Therefore, by exploring teachers' cognition and practices of EE in classroom settings, the study offers valuable insights for aiming toward equity which is in line with the general objectives of promoting EE embedded in national policies and curriculum including the *Outline of the National Mid- and Long-Term Plan for Educational Reform and Development 2010–2020* (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2010), China's *Education Modernization 2035* (Central Committee of the Communist

Party of China & State Council, 2019) and *Higher Education Law of the People's Republic of China* (2018 Amendment) (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2018) as well as the *College English Curriculum Requirements* (Chinese Ministry of Education, 2020) and thus can enable Chinese MOE to refer to for promulgating more effective policy directives.

Secondly, as for the curriculum developers and experts in the higher education system, the study can be a boon to urge them to reflect on their roles in formulating EE-oriented guidelines and curriculum design for EFL teaching at the tertiary level in China. Since improving teachers' cognition and practices is the prerequisite for the success of educational reforms and curriculum transformation, the findings will draw some attention from curriculum designers and experts to regard EE in the EFL area as a pressing issue to be addressed.

Thirdly, the study is meaningful for university teachers to enhance their equity-based pedagogical philosophy and instructional paradigm. As is known, China has an enormous quantity of EFL teachers; by illustrating the underlying relationship between EFL teachers' cognition and practices in teaching of reading as well as offering effective equitable strategies to integrate EE-related cognition into classroom practices, the study can propel sustainable professional development of EFL teachers in China through improving their pedagogical expertise complemented with cultivating the correct cognition of EE.

Fourthly, the study will be beneficial to enhancing learning subjects' sense of justice and joy of learning, which can contribute to their academic development. For each student, the unfairness and injustices within the classroom may have a more direct and severe impact on individual development. Therefore, improving teachers' EE-oriented cognition and practices can ensure that every student gets fair treatment and

receives equal learning opportunities. Only when students feel a sense of equity and justice in the classroom can their satisfaction, efficacy, and commitment to others increase (Berti et al., 2010; Ehrhardt-Madapathi et al., 2018).

1.8 Limitations of the Study

Though the study was carefully designed and conducted to examine EFL teachers' cognition and practices of EE in teaching of reading in China, the following limitations were unavoidable and uncontrollable.

To begin with, it should be noted that due to the inherent characteristics of qualitative research, the potential for generalizability of findings is limited. Unlike quantitative investigations, qualitative studies, characterized by smaller sample sizes, prioritize the acquisition of insights, theory development, and contextual comprehension over statistical extrapolation. The present study centers on delving into the intricacies of cognition and practices regarding EE of 10 EFL teachers from the Chinese teaching context at the tertiary level, the small number of participants and the specific context may have its own intricacies that make direct generalization challenging.

Besides, the gender distribution within the sampling for this study was uneven. In qualitative research, it is common to aim for a more balanced and diverse group of participants to ensure the research's quality, credibility, and relevance. This helps to explore the topic thoroughly and understand the phenomenon being studied in a comprehensive way. However, though the researcher tried to maintain an even representation, due to the lack of male teachers in the College English department at ZT University, only four male participants were recruited against six female participants. This unbalanced gender sample might limit the depth and breadth of

insights gathered from the study, potentially overlooking important nuances and variations in the responses of the male participants.

Additionally, though the researcher video-recorded and audio-recorded participants' classes with the best equipment she could get, there were instances where certain subtle non-verbal interactions occurring between teachers and students proved to be challenging to capture effectively. Recognizing the potential importance of these nuanced interactions in shaping classroom dynamics, the study's findings could be constrained by the potential lack of comprehensive documentation of these non-verbal cues.

1.9 Operational Definition of Key Terms

In this study, certain terms are employed, and their respective definitions within the scope of this study are explicated as follows:

1.9.1 Educational Equity

Rawls' (2005) concept of EE is mainly reflected in the principles he proposed. They are the greatest equal liberty principle, equality of opportunity principle and difference principle, meaning that all should be given equal liberty and equal opportunities regardless of socioeconomic disparities and the greatest benefit of the least-advantaged should be guaranteed. In this study, EE requires the teaching of reading of EFL teachers to be equitable and inclusive, that is, empowering all the students with due liberty to choose what and how they want to learn, providing diverse teaching materials to sustain the interest of all the students, varying scaffolding-oriented reading strategies to facilitate their in-depth reading, and offering equitable opportunities for hands-on literacy activities and group collaboration so that all of them

can succeed in improving the comprehensive reading skills regardless of the diverse identity markers such as gender, race, color and socioeconomic status.

1.9.2 Equitable Strategies

The term refers to teaching strategies that can support instructors in paying attention to whom they are trying to help learn in an equitable and inclusive way. To strive for classroom equity, teachers are encouraged to structure the classroom environment in a way that optimizes fairness and opportunities for all individuals, not just those who are engaged already (Cothorne, 2018; Tanner, 2013). In this study, equitable strategies specifically mean the teaching strategies that can support EFL teachers in China in assisting students to learn reading through structuring an equitable and inclusive classroom environment for all.

1.9.3 Teaching of Reading

It is defined by Durkin (2003) in a broad sense—“anything teacher does that leads directly or indirectly, immediately or finally, to improvement in a child’s (a learner’s) ability to read” (p.3). More specifically, effective teaching of reading encompasses a range of techniques and methods designed to build foundational skills such as phonics, phonological awareness, vocabulary development, comprehension strategies, fluency, and critical thinking skills. In this study, teaching of reading refers to the efforts made by EFL teachers during the teaching of college intensive reading courses, to not only help learners decode written texts but also to comprehend and derive meaning from what they read, fostering literacy and facilitating lifelong learning.

1.9.4 Teacher Cognition

Teacher cognition refers to what teachers know, think and believe and how they connect to their classroom practices (Borg, 2003). Teacher cognition, as an umbrella term, encompasses elements like knowledge, beliefs, thinking, conceptions, attitudes, theories, assumptions and decision-making, which exerts an influential impact on teachers' classroom practices and professional development (Borg, 2003; 2006). Since teacher knowledge, belief and pedagogical thinking are the three main constructs in cognition (Borg, 2003, 2013; Calderhead, 1996; Öztürk, 2021), in this study, the term teacher cognition was defined as EFL teachers' knowledge of EE, their beliefs in enhancing EE, and their pedagogical thinking in practicing EE in teaching of reading.

1.9.5 Teachers' Practices

Teachers' practices refer to teachers' application or employment of their knowledge, beliefs, and thoughts in actual classroom teaching (Woods, 1996). Teachers' instructional practices are greatly influenced by their cognition, influential factors and contextual factors. When contextualizing it in the Chinese EFL context with a focus on EE, the term in this study relates chiefly to EFL teachers' application or use of their knowledge, beliefs, and pedagogical thinking about EE in teaching of reading in China.

1.9.6 Experiential Factors

Experiential factors refer to teachers' prior personal experiences as learners and teachers that may have an impact on their existing cognition and thus influence their practices of language teaching (Borg, 2006). The experiential factor is also an important link in the interplay between teacher cognition and practices. In this study, the term involves two aspects: schooling and professional experiences of EFL teachers

in China that can have an impact on their cognition and practices of EE in teaching of reading.

1.9.6(a) Schooling Experience

In Borg's language teacher framework, schooling experience, as one of the constructs in experiential factors, refers to the "personal history and specific experience of classrooms which define preconceptions of education" of language teachers (Borg, 2006, p.283). In this study, it specifically means EFL teachers' own prior schooling experience regarding EE that has shaped their initial cognition of EE.

1.9.6(b) Professional Experience

The term is one of the constructs in Borg's language teacher framework, referring to teacher education and ongoing classroom experiences, which may impact teachers' existing cognitions (Borg, 2006). In this study, it means EFL teachers' professional training experiences and their teaching experiences regarding EE.

1.9.7 Contextual Factors

Contextual factors refer to social, psychological, and environmental factors existing in and outside of the classrooms and institutions that are out of teachers' control, such as curricula, materials, colleagues, class size, and context (Borg, 2006). Contextual factors can act either as constraints or facilitators of teachers' teaching quality (Coles et al., 2020; Sugesti et al., 2020). Therefore, in this study, this term is conceptualized as the external factors existing both inside and outside of the classroom and institutions that can exert either facilitating or constraining impact on EFL teachers' cognition and practices of EE in teaching of reading in China.