

## *Original Paper*

# ESL/EFL Teachers' Role in Moral and Political Education in China and Its Implications for Pre-Service Teacher Education

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### **Abstract**

*ESL/EFL teaching exhibits a strong compatibility with moral and political education, and its classroom is a natural place for instruction. Teachers assume pivotal roles as leaders, designers, and practitioners, wielding considerable influence over the quality of foreign language teaching through their capacity to impart moral values and cultivate ethical awareness. It is imperative to incorporate moral values into teacher education to equip teachers with the requisite skills to foster moral development in their students. However, the pre-service education in China has failed to address the issue, resulting in a lack of pertinent training. As a result, in-service teachers often encounter challenges when attempting to integrate moral and political education into their pedagogical practices, including a deficiency in relevant knowledge, inadequate skill sets, and inappropriate teaching methods. Consequently, a crucial necessity exists for comprehensive revisions to pre-service education programs, particularly to curriculum and course design, to meet the specific needs of ESL/EFL teachers.*

### **Keywords**

*ESL/EFL teaching, moral and political education, pre-service teacher education*

## **1. Introduction**

“The essential thing is not knowledge, but character”, said Joseph Le Conte. Confucius believed that the purpose of education is to “cultivate one’s morality, regulate one’s family, govern the country, and bring peace to the world”. Education in and of itself is much more than imparting knowledge, but more importantly plays a role in shaping one’s character and moral values.

Moral education refers to the process of teaching and learning values, ethics, and principles that guide an individual’s behavior in society and decision-making. The goal of moral education is to develop individuals’ character, integrity, and ethical reasoning, and to help them become responsible, compassionate, and contributing members of society. The importance of moral education cannot be

overstated, especially in today's rapidly changing and complex world. It is an essential component of a well-rounded education that not only prepares individuals for academic and career success but also enables them to make a positive impact on the world around them.

Moral education has long been highly valued in China and has its root in Confucianism, which emphasizes social order, respect for authority, and the importance of education. In recent years, the Chinese government has adopted a more comprehensive approach and elevated moral education to moral and political education incorporating Marxist principles and socialist values. This approach aims to shape students' behaviors and beliefs in a way that aligns with the country's political ideology and thus promote national unity, patriotism, social harmony, and cultural identity. The Ministry of Education issued the "Guidelines for Moral and Political Construction of Higher Education Curriculum" in 2020, which emphasizes that "moral and political education in the curriculum" is a responsibility that every teacher must bear.

The ESL/EFL classroom is a natural place for instruction in moral education as the English language education discipline lends itself rather well to the dynamics of moral values (Shaaban, 2005). Moral is an essential component of foreign language learning, as it helps students develop a deeper understanding and appreciation of different cultures and perspectives and shape students' attitudes and behaviors towards others. Moral and political education requires teachers to have sound moral values, comprehensive knowledge and good teaching ability. However, the implementation of moral and political education in China has faced several challenges, one of which is the lack of trained teachers in this field. Most ESL/EFL teachers are confused and uncertain while teaching morality in class.

The research on ESL/EFL teaching with a moral focus has been increasing and gradually formed a systematic trend. There has been research on the characteristics, dimensions, status quo and development of moral and political education in foreign language teaching, but there is a lack of discussion on how to improve teachers' moral and political teaching ability from the perspective of teacher education, especially pre-service teacher education. This study attempts to explore the ESL/EFL teacher's role in moral education, analyze the challenges they face and the problems with pre-service teacher education in China, and then suggest solutions.

## **2. The Role of ESL/EFL Teachers in Moral and Political Education**

Only with high-quality teachers, can there be high-quality education. As the driving force of classroom teaching, teachers are the key elements in implementing moral and political education in curriculum. Asif, Ouyang, Haider, Colomer, Kayani, and Amin (2020) suggested that teachers' perceptions and beliefs about the goals of moral education and areas students must learn are essential because teachers play a critical role in the moral development of their students. Durkheim (1961) believed that teachers should be models of morally correct behavior, and their mission is to transmit the core values of modern secular societies by pedagogy, personality, and public behavior. The teacher's task is not simply to pass on knowledge verbally, but also to model "the good" and "the right". According to Wen

(2021), ESL/EFL teachers are the practitioners of moral and political education in foreign language teaching, who not only need to cultivate students' ability to use foreign languages for effective communication, but more importantly play a leading role in establishing students' ideals and beliefs and shaping their values. In Huang and Xiao's (2021) paper, all teachers should be good teachers, not only teaching textbook knowledge, but also shaping students' character, conduct, and taste. Therefore, ESL/EFL teachers play multiple roles in moral and political education, serving as role models of words and deeds, imparters of knowledge and experience, and guides and facilitators of students' moral development and comprehensive abilities.

### *2.1 What Is Required of ESL/EFL Teachers in Moral and Political Education?*

"The National Standards for Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Majors in Ordinary Institutions for Higher Learning" (The Higher Education Teaching Guidance Committee of the Ministry of Education, 2018) clearly defines that foreign language teaching is part of humanities and social sciences education, which include foreign linguistics, foreign literature, translation studies, national and regional studies, comparative literature, and cross-cultural research. Language, literature, and cultural knowledge themselves do not exist in isolation, but contain rich humanistic connotations, including historical and social changes, natural evolution, technological innovation, economic development, the alternation of civilizations, the exchange of ideas, cultural diversity, ideology and values, etc. The scope of moral and political education in foreign language courses should cover all aspects of foreign language teaching, from teaching content to classroom management, from teaching evaluation to teachers' words and deeds, and should be comprehensive, multi-dimensional, multi-level, and without any blind angles or spots (Wu, Zhang, & Miao, 2020). "A Guide to College English Teaching" (The Guidance Committee for Foreign Language Teaching in Higher Education Institutions of the Ministry of Education, 2020) states that the new teaching goal of college English is to cultivate students' English application ability, enhance cross-cultural communication awareness and ability, while developing independent learning ability, improving comprehensive cultural literacy, cultivating humanistic spirit and critical thinking ability, so that students can use English appropriately and effectively in learning, life, and future work, meeting the needs of the country, society, school, and personal development. Therefore, moral and political education in college English courses places high demands on teachers' knowledge, teaching ability, and moral character.

In knowledge domain, foreign language courses should cover various topics such as culture, society, economy, technology, law, etc. Cates (1999) identifies geographical literacy, world themes, and global issues as the key content areas. Urch (1992) suggests the study of world cultures, major global topics, and the planet as an interdependent entity. Yoshimura (1993) proposes placing emphasis on the study of human rights, the environment, peace education, and intercultural communication. Brown (1997) suggests the topics of study such as global interdependence, humane treatment of every living creature, cultural awareness and tolerance, and non-violent approaches to settling disputes. The present framework recommends placing emphasis in the ESL/EFL classroom on the following messages that

help build and develop the moral character of the learners: basic rights and wrongs, societal duties and responsibilities, respect for self and others, cultural awareness and appreciation, recognition and avoidance of prejudice, basic social values and attitudes, respect for the environment, societal and global peace, concern for the planet, and intracultural and intercultural communication (Shaaban, 2005). Liu and Yue (2020) suggest that for college English teaching, the basic connotation of “cultivating virtue and cultivating talents” mainly includes three aspects: excellent traditional Chinese culture, excellent world culture, and the spirit of the times and the idea of a community with a shared future for mankind. Liu (2020) believes that moral and political education in college foreign language courses should integrate and include the following content: excellent traditional Chinese culture, socialist core values, comparison of Chinese and foreign cultures, cultivation of international organizational competence to familiarize students with international politics, economy, culture, law, etc. The aforementioned topics encompass a broad spectrum of social life and human activity, with cultural, social, economic, environmental, and global issues being particularly pertinent to moral education in foreign language instruction. Consequently, in addition to subject-matter knowledge, EFL/ESL teachers must possess comprehensive social, humanistic, and scientific knowledge to fulfill the requisite criteria. In terms of teaching ability, ESL/EFL teachers should be equipped with adequate teaching approaches, methods and techniques to teach effectively and through teaching guide students’ values. Teaching ability refers to the personality traits, knowledge, skills, and attitudes required by teachers to achieve effective teaching in various teaching contexts (Tigelaar, Dolmans, Wolfhagen, & Vleuten, 2004). Teaching ability determines the effectiveness and quality of teaching, and serves as an important guarantee for quality. From the perspective of the dimensions of teaching ability, it mainly includes the professional knowledge, teaching skills, and comprehensive literacy, and from the perspective of teaching activities, it involves the ability to apply subject knowledge, design the content, practice teaching, reflect and evaluate teaching, and conduct academic research (Huang & Chen, 2019). The moral and political education of foreign language courses is inevitably an educational ability integrated with foreign language teaching ability. While imparting foreign language knowledge and cultivating practical abilities, teachers must use language form as a carrier and the rich content as a means to guide and educate their thinking in a skillful and hidden way, and achieve the unity of “teaching and educating” (Zhang & Wang, 2020). The ability of moral and political teaching in foreign language courses is mainly reflected in ESL/EFL teachers’ ability to integrate ideological and political principles into the language courses (Li, 2021). Zhang and Meng (2021) summarized the moral and political teaching abilities of college English teachers into three aspects, namely the cognitive ability to know and understand the educational value of courses, the ability to analyze and explore moral and political elements of teaching content, and the practical ability to integrate moral education into classroom teaching. Gao and Zhang (2022) constructed a foreign language moral and political teaching ability model with five dimensions: educational literacy, subject literacy, teaching literacy, research literacy, and global literacy. Chu and Wang (2020) explored the moral and political teaching abilities of college

ESL/EFL teachers from four aspects based on teaching practice, including learner-centered curriculum design ability, context construction ability to integrate reality, teaching construction ability by cooperative interaction, and process management ability. Zhang, Zhao, and Hu (2022) defined the ability as the subjective understanding, professional knowledge, and objective behavior that ESL/EFL teachers should possess when implementing high-quality moral and political education in courses. Based on prior research and the purpose of this study, it is posited that the moral and political teaching ability in foreign language courses is exercised in three phases: before, during, and after class. In the preparatory phase, the teacher establish lucid and attainable course objectives, explore and develop pedagogical content, and design various relevant activities. During class, teachers construct contexts and foster a problem-solving-oriented, real-world-like classroom environment; apply various pedagogical techniques to integrate the political and moral elements into instruction while motivating student engagement; and effectively evaluate students and provide prompt feedback. In the post-class phase, instructors engage in reflective practice, make adjustments, and conduct pertinent research. Therefore, ESL/EFL teachers face the demanding task of simultaneously teaching language and morality. Teachers need to employ eclectic teaching methods and techniques to combine foreign language and the understanding of the world with a focus on moral aspects.

Significantly also, teachers are required to help students enhance their innovative spirit, entrepreneurial awareness, patriotism, and ability to integrate Chinese and foreign cultures, improve ideological and moral cultivation, humanistic quality, scientific spirit, constitutional and legal awareness, national security awareness, etc. “National Standards for Teaching Quality of Undergraduate Majors in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions” suggests that foreign language talents should have a correct worldview and outlook on life, and moral qualities, as well as an international perspective, patriotic sentiment, and a sense of responsibility. The moral education model recommended by Shaaban (2005) includes the development of fundamental values, principles, and attitudes, continuous character growth that allows learners to become concerned, informed, and involved citizens, and laying down the foundations of a critical approach to controversial issues. Wen (2021) argues that the external performance, spiritual world, and attitude of teachers towards students serve as role models for their behavior norms and promote their growth. Consequently, teachers must possess a wholesome personality, sound mental faculties, commendable moral attributes, dedication, and patriotism, and demonstrate the capacity to practice socialist values, thereby positively influencing students’ attitudes and behaviors.

In summary, the moral and political education in college foreign language courses necessitates high standards for ESL/EFL teachers in various domains. Firstly, teachers must serve as role models for students by regulating their own words, deeds, and moral character. Secondly, with regards to pedagogical content, teachers must possess not only proficiency in English but also a comprehensive understanding of culture, economy, politics, technology, law, and other fields to foster students’ general knowledge literacy and international understanding. Thirdly, ESL/EFL teachers must exhibit strong speculative awareness and the capacity to facilitate active student engagement during the learning

process. Additionally, instructors must demonstrate mastery of appropriate pedagogical techniques and possess robust moral and political teaching competencies. This entails the ability to employ task-based, project-based, cooperative, exploratory, and hybrid teaching methodologies to construct contextual frameworks and seamlessly integrate moral and political elements into language instruction to achieve the goals and objectives of moral and political education.

### *2.2 What Are the Challenges Faced by ESL/EFL Teachers?*

Though moral and political education in foreign language teaching has received increasing attention and become a hot research topic in recent years, teachers remain uncertain and confused, indicating a significant need for improvement. Pan and Yuan (2021) found ESL/EFL teachers are confronted with the following problems: first, there is still a gap between teachers' perception and what is referred to in the Guideline, and their understanding of the content of moral and political education is not adequate; second, although college ESL/EFL teachers are able to provide moral and political education to some extent, teaching objectives are not yet clear and specific enough, and the design of moral and political content by teachers in teaching is relatively singular and mainly revolves around cultural perspectives; third, teachers still have little understanding of how to integrate moral and political assessment into teaching evaluation. In Zhang's (2022) survey, it was found that as for the purpose and significance of moral and political education in foreign language courses, teachers' understanding of the definition, connotation, and specific requirements is not adequate; in terms of teaching content, some teachers still have doubts about what should be included and they hope to have examples to follow; from the perspective of teaching methods and skills, some teachers have difficulty in integrating moral and political content into teaching in a natural way. Wang (2022) also found in her study that the teacher participants do not understand the connotation of moral and political education, how to combine moral and political goals with knowledge and ability objectives, how to integrate moral and political education into college English teaching, and what the standard is to evaluate the course and students.

Concurring with previous research findings, the author's observations indicate that ESL/EFL instructors face several challenges in implementing moral and political education within the curriculum. Firstly, teachers generally possess an inadequate perception of the objectives, connotations, and implications of moral and political education, resulting in an inability to establish lucid course and instructional goals. Secondly, uncertainty regarding the content to be conveyed to students impedes the integration of moral and political elements into foreign language instruction. Thirdly, teachers struggle to employ suitable and efficacious pedagogical methods and techniques to impart moral content in an implicit way and attain desired outcomes. Fourthly, the absence of appropriate measurement tools precludes effective assessment of students' moral and political competencies and the provision of timely feedback. Therefore, it is difficult for teachers to meet the requirements of moral and political education in various aspects such as cognition, knowledge, and teaching ability.

### 3. Problems with Pre-Service ESL/EFL Teacher Education

Borg (2003) noted that teacher cognition is initially shaped by teachers' school education and professional experience and refers to cognitive structures such as knowledge, beliefs, and thoughts. Teacher education programs aim to prepare graduates to become quality teachers equipped with pedagogical practices that will serve to meet the increasing demands associated with the teaching profession (Mergler & Spooner-Lane, 2012). Wakefield (1997) said, "If tomorrow's teachers are to be responsible and effective conduits of moral education, teacher education programs must take up the challenge or moral education instruction." However, teacher education is increasingly preoccupied with content and academic attainment for its own sake, rendering it insufficiently attentive to those fundamentally human concerns that characterize teaching and through which teachers educate their students (Orchard, 2020). The incorporation of moral values into foreign language teacher education is crucial in adequately equipping teachers with the requisite skills to foster moral development in their students. Currently, numerous in-service training programs are underway. Although a comprehensive system is yet to be established, the Ministry of Education, local education departments, institutions, and universities organize lectures, training classes, workshops, and other initiatives that offer valuable learning resources for teachers. However, our understanding of how teacher education programs effectively prepare student teachers for moral and political education remains limited. The aforementioned challenges faced by ESL/EFL teachers indicate that moral and political education has not received due attention in pre-service education. This raises important questions about the moral aspects of teacher education programs, such as whether there are systematic connections between goals, objectives, programs, pedagogical methods, and outcomes. Additionally, it raises concerns about whether student teachers' moral and political knowledge and teaching abilities can be developed and enhanced to the extent that they are qualified to engage in future teaching with a values-focus.

The School of Foreign Languages in Normal Universities in China holds significant importance as a primary provider of ESL/EFL teachers. Therefore, it is crucial that its training programs and curriculum design align with the Ministry of Education's requirements concerning moral and political education. By examining the status-quo of pre-service education at normal universities, we can gain insights into the extent to which the training programs reflect this objective. In this regard, we will specifically focus on a typical Chinese normal university as an example, analyzing the training programs offered to undergraduate and graduate students majoring in English. Our analysis will encompass an assessment of the educational goals, course objectives, and overall design of these programs to determine their efficacy in cultivating ESL/EFL teachers who should possess the ability to naturally and effectively teach with a strong moral focus.

First and foremost, the training program for undergraduate English majors at this normal university has a primary goal of cultivating diversified elite talents. These individuals are expected to possess comprehensive qualities, solid English language skills, extensive knowledge of English language and literature, essential professional knowledge, a broad international perspective, cross-cultural

communication abilities, critical thinking skills, and research and innovation capabilities. Furthermore, the program places significant emphasis on students' moral qualities, correct worldviews, outlooks on life, and values. It also emphasizes the development of social responsibility, patriotism, international perspective, humanistic and scientific literacy, as well as an innovative and cooperative spirit. The courses offered to foreign language undergraduates are divided into two categories: liberal education courses and professional education courses. The liberal education courses consist of five modules that cover various aspects, namely family and social responsibility, international vision and dialogue among civilizations, classic studies and cultural inheritance, mathematical foundation and scientific literacy, art appreciation and aesthetic experience, as well as social development and civic responsibility. It is evident that the training program for undergraduates aligns closely with the national guidelines for curriculum moral and political education, particularly in terms of the explicit requirements for students' moral quality and professional literacy. However, it is worth noting that there are certain discrepancies within the curriculum. Some courses are not closely related to their designated modules, as certain basic language courses or general courses are categorized under specific modules that do not correspond to their content. For instance, comprehensive English reading and listening and speaking are listed under the module of international vision and civilization dialogue, while physical education is included under the module of family and social responsibility. As a result, the modules do not accurately agree with the courses bearing their names. Additionally, courses addressing the development of traditional Chinese culture and modern civilization, comparative studies of Chinese and Western languages and cultures, and the cultivation of critical thinking are unavailable. These discrepancies indicate a gap between the views held by program heads and the actual implementation of the curriculum. While the training program incorporates the concept of moral and political education and meets the requirements, its implementation falls short in cultivating students' moral and political knowledge and competence necessary for effective teaching. Moral and political education should be integrated implicitly into the education of college students as a whole, but for teacher students or those aspiring to become teachers, it warrants explicit attention and a direct connection with teacher preparation programs. Only through long-term guidance and training can students acquire the necessary abilities to become qualified language teachers.

In comparison, the graduate program at the university largely overlooks moral and political education. The curriculum design lacks clear requirements and consists of basic courses, professional courses, and special courses. Basic courses are open to all students, while professional and special courses are offered based on majors. Taking Foreign Linguistics and Applied Linguistics as an example, basic courses include general linguistics, translatology, research methodology, and language learning theory. Professional courses cover pragmatics, semantics, applied linguistics, teaching theory and methods, while special courses encompass cognitive linguistics, functional linguistics, language testing, and textbook analysis. Upon reviewing the syllabi of each course, it becomes evident that the primary objective is to impart professional knowledge and cultivate students' professional literacy and research



abilities. However, none of these courses address moral and political issues. Even in the curriculum for the English Language and Literature major, there is a notable absence of content relating to Chinese culture or contemporary realities. Instead, the focus remains primarily on the English-speaking world, with the mistaken belief that students have possessed sufficient knowledge about China and Chinese language. Thus, it is clear that the training program for graduate students lacks due attention to the moral and political aspects, and there is an absence of relevant content from planning to practice. The responsibility for impacting future teachers solely rests with the teacher educators through personal behavior and role modeling, yet this approach alone is inadequate in equipping students with the ability to integrate moral and political education into language teaching.

These findings highlight the gaps that persist in teacher education programs and explain why the requirements of moral and political education cannot be fully met at the teachers' college. It is evident that there are discrepancies between the national guidelines and the training program and curriculum for foreign language majors at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Consequently, there is a lack of emphasis on moral and political education, and the programs overlook the crucial role of promoting moral values in foreign language education. The challenges faced by in-service teachers in implementing moral and political education largely stem from the inadequate training provided during pre-service stage. This leads to problems such as inaccurate understanding, insufficient knowledge of moral values and political principles, and inappropriate teaching ability. Therefore, it is essential to make changes in programs, particularly in curriculum and course design, for ESL/EFL pre-service teachers to address these deficiencies.

#### **4. Implications for Pre-Service Education**

The pre-service education of foreign language teachers plays a pivotal role in shaping their professional knowledge and fostering their teaching abilities. As a result, the perception and attitude of foreign language teachers towards moral and political education heavily rely on the quality of their pre-service education, which also significantly affects their teaching competencies. Thus, it is imperative to reform and adjust pre-service education programs at universities to enhance the capabilities of student teachers. Comprehensive revisions are suggested with the aim to meet the needs of ESL/EFL teachers.

Firstly, principles and content related to moral and political education should be clearly articulated and described in the training program, including the goals, objectives, requirements, curriculum and courses, thus to make it accessible to teachers and students who need to know what rules to follow during teaching and learning. In this way, student teachers can have a track record and specify their own teaching design for moral and political education after becoming real teachers.

Secondly, the individuals in charge of the training programs should engage in effective communication with teachers and students regarding curriculum design, teaching content and methods. This collaboration should be based on a thorough examination of national policies, and consensus should be reached that guarantees the efficiency of its practice. Student teachers, through communication and

exchange of information with teachers and school authority, have the opportunity to understand and familiarize themselves with the entire process of formulating and implementing moral and political teaching plans.

Thirdly, a comprehensive and inclusive curriculum system should be developed with special emphasis on students' moral and political qualities. Courses focusing on moral education must be integrated into the curriculum. For instance, an introductory course on moral and political education can provide students with a clear and accurate understanding of its purpose and expectations, alleviating doubts and misconceptions. Additionally, to enhance students' knowledge of Chinese culture, language, history and politics, and enhance their ability to compare China with the Western world, courses such as "Chinese Studies" and "Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Cultures" should be available throughout the program. Then, liberal arts education should have an established place in curriculum, covering humanities, social sciences, natural sciences and formal sciences, and it need to run throughout the training program. Furthermore, teacher education programs should promote intercultural competence by providing opportunities for future teachers to engage in intercultural experiences, such as study-abroad programs or service-learning projects. In this way, student teachers can develop a relatively complete knowledge system, and provide accurate and timely information and share helpful experience during moral and political education afterwards.

Fourthly, the evaluation of moral aspects should be part of the curriculum and student assessments so as to have a positive washback impact on teaching. Clear criteria and measurement tools, including rubrics, ought to be provided to ensure the quality of future teachers. The firsthand experience will enable student teachers to acquire what and how to evaluate in terms of moral and political competence.

Lastly, students should have opportunities for teaching practicum, during which teacher educators assist and guide them in practicing teaching and gaining field experience related to moral and political education. This includes incorporating moral education into language teaching with problem-based or task-based teaching approaches. Students deepen their understanding of moral and political education and improve their ability to teach by imitating and improving the teacher's teaching methods. By doing so, student teachers can develop awareness and acquire the necessary teaching skills to address moral and political issues, thereby achieving the desired outcomes.

## **5. Conclusion**

Foreign language teaching exhibits a strong compatibility with moral and political education, serving as an excellent platform for practice. Foreign language teachers assume the roles of leaders, designers, and practitioners, with their moral and political literacies directly influencing the quality and effectiveness of foreign language instruction. However, foreign language teachers encounter numerous challenges and obstacles in the process. Consequently, teacher education, particularly pre-service education, should receive greater attention. More hard work need be done to promote the quality of

teacher education to ensure that we have morally qualified ESL/EFL teachers who are able to teach morality. This study aims to attract more researchers to participate and collaboratively create more practical, effective, and reasonable training mechanisms in the future.

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