

Article

Examining the Professional Quality of Experienced EFL Teachers for Their Sustainable Career Trajectories in Rural Areas in China

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Abstract: While there has been much research into teachers' professional quality in general education, scant attention has been paid to the professional quality of EFL (English as a foreign language) teachers, especially those working in adverse areas, for their sustainable career trajectories. Drawing on Wu's framework of EFL teachers' professional quality, this study adopted a mixed-method study design to investigate the professional quality of experienced EFL teachers in China's rural areas. A questionnaire was administered online to 367 Chinese EFL teachers from 15 high schools in the northeast part of China. Follow-up interviews were then conducted with four volunteers. The results of the exploratory factor analysis produced a two-module structure of teachers' professional quality, addressing teacher beliefs and English language pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) for their sustainable career development. The teacher belief module addresses beliefs about language teacher learning and development as well as beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning. The English language PCK module includes two subscales: English teaching capacity and English knowledge and skills. Descriptive analysis showed that these participants had high levels of professional quality. Possible explanations for the interpretations of EFL teachers' professional quality are provided from the qualitative data. Based on the above findings, the paper offers some implications for sustaining EFL teacher development in the future.

Keywords: EFL teacher; professional quality; teacher beliefs; pedagogical content knowledge; high school



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1. Introduction

Language teacher education (LTE), which spans a wide variety of topics and perspectives, has been extensively researched since the 1990s [1–7]. As an important agenda, language teacher professional quality has gained in popularity in LTE research [8–10], particularly along with some updated teaching methods including communicative language teaching (CLT), and more recently task-based language teaching (TBLT) and content and language integrated learning (CLIL). Some scholars have paid special attention to the quality of expert or effective EFL teachers [10–15]. Research into teacher excellence has been conducted to interpret and improve their professional experiences and beliefs [16], thus providing an effective reference for more inexperienced teachers [17], especially those working in underprivileged rural areas. Prior studies have depicted teaching as a profession full of pressure and challenges [18,19]. As a key constituent of any teaching staff, English language teachers can be overwhelmed by negative emotions due to dysfunctional interpersonal relationships [20] and unrealistic public expectations [21]. Meanwhile, waves of language education reform and socioeconomic transformations have imposed higher demands and called for more qualified teachers [21,22]. The exploration of EFL

teachers' professional quality also offers a productive insight into the implementation and improvement of policies related to teacher education and development. Overall, teachers' professional quality, as an under-researched but meaningful area [10,17], is worth exploring in LTE research.

Language teachers' professional quality is defined as teacher-related features that contribute to successful English language teaching, favourable educational outcomes [23] and sustainable professional development [8,10]. Some scholars have attempted to conceptualise teachers' professional quality as a multi-dimensional construct [8,10,24,25] and have probed into the distinctive features of excellent EFL teachers [13,16]. Understanding EFL teachers' professional quality not only helps inspire teachers to sustain their professional development but also thrive in the school context. However, scant attention has been paid to the features of EFL teachers [10,26], especially in China's rural areas.

Despite low dropout rates of teachers in the Chinese context [18], Chinese EFL teachers, especially those in adverse situations, suffer from certain challenges, such as a lack of teaching resources, low salaries, large class sizes, low student learning motivation, and job burnout [10,21,27–29]. Notably, there were 2.9 million teachers working in China's rural areas until 2018 [30]. Among these, qualified teachers played a leading role in shaping teaching communities and promoting students' physical and psychological growth in underdeveloped regions [10,31]. Therefore, there is a need to expand research on teachers' professional quality and knowledge. To the best of our knowledge, few studies to date have empirically investigated experienced teachers' professional quality in the rural Chinese EFL teaching context. Against this backdrop, the current study adopts a mixed-methods design to explore the profiles and levels of Chinese EFL teachers' professional quality in rural areas.

2. Research on EFL Teachers' Professional Quality

EFL teachers' professional quality can be viewed as the teacher-related features that contribute to successful English language teaching and favourable educational outcomes [10,23]. Many scholars interested in teachers' professional quality have focused on the distinctive characteristics of EFL teachers [8,10,32–34]. Expert EFL teachers have more knowledge of learners, learning, and teaching and the ability to combine theoretical and practical knowledge, actively engage students in class and themselves in critical reflection, and respond to different contexts [12,17]. Taken together, the specific features of teachers' professional quality can be divided into two thematic groups: teacher beliefs [24,35–41] and teaching capacity [8,10,17,24,42–47].

The modern educational paradigm demonstrates a shift from learning outcomes to practice-oriented competencies. Competence-based teaching in institutions and its evaluation have become a prevalent topic. For instance, the need for a better evolution of competence-based teachers has been emphasised [48]. Morais [49] also suggested that the teacher training implemented was favourable to the teachers' professional development and their competence to lead to a high level of scientific development. Competence-based training has become an inclusive international education policy. Prior studies have also shown teacher belief to be a critical component of teachers' professional quality [35–37,39,41,50]. Teacher beliefs were related to their perceptions and thoughts about all aspects of school education, and their attitudes towards teaching and learning over the course of their careers [51,52]. Previous studies have found that teachers display beliefs about language teaching and learning (i.e., an understanding of their own teaching profession and students' learning, as well as the role of the English language) [8,37] and beliefs about language teacher learning and development (i.e., attitudes towards and the pursuit of professional development) [8,36,38,39]. Specifically, beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning have been found to involve teachers' cognition of student-oriented teaching [11,53,54] and their pedagogic goals [8,55]. Beliefs about language teacher learning and development emphasise the interconnection between teaching theory and practices [36,39,41] and the interaction between teachers' professional development and contexts [38]. For example, Zheng [36] adopted a complexity theory

to reveal the non-linear relationship between Chinese EFL teachers' teaching beliefs and practice and found that teachers' teaching practices could be influenced by their beliefs, which were usually embodied in EFL teaching objectives. Additionally, Larenas, Hernandez, and Navarrete [37] identified seven types of EFL teacher beliefs: the use of English in EFL lessons, the teacher role, the student role, the teaching components (i.e., materials, resources, EFL activities, assessment), the role of the teaching and learning context, the role of the language curriculum, and the relationship between the language curriculum and the coursebook contents. Overall, these studies involved teachers' perceptions and interpretations of what, where, and how they taught in a school context, expanding our understanding of teachers' real teaching experiences, feelings, and beliefs and creating favourable resources to satisfy their needs and enhance their professional quality.

Teaching capacity refers to teachers' ability to choose appropriate teaching methods, reorganise or process teaching content, and achieve teaching objectives given students' learning needs and interests [8]. Based on this interpretation, two major aspects of teaching capacity can be demystified: teaching/teacher knowledge [44,56,57] and skills [24,44,46,54,58]. Specifically, teacher knowledge usually involves pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) [8,59,60] and contextual knowledge [24,44,61]. PCK, the "special amalgam of content and pedagogy" [57] (p. 8), is an integration of subject knowledge and pedagogic knowledge [59,60]. Richards [44] conceptualised contextual knowledge as "an understanding of how the practice of language teaching is shaped by the contexts in which it takes place, and the role of societal, community and institutional factors in language teaching" (p. 12). Additionally, teaching skills are pertinent to teachers' repertoires, bringing about effective student learning [44,46], including generic teaching skills and basic capacity specific to EFL teachers. Richards [44] proposed a knowledge framework for second language teacher education, which involved teaching theories, teaching skills, communication skills, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical reasoning skills and decision-making, and contextual knowledge. This comprehensive framework helps to unpack teachers' beliefs and their teaching knowledge to a certain extent.

In summary, EFL teachers' beliefs and capacity have been widely canvassed in teacher professional quality research primarily from a qualitative perspective, with a focus on case studies [10,12,17]. However, scant attention has been paid to the exploration of EFL teachers' professional quality using a quantitative or mixed-research design. Some prior studies provide us with a theoretical framework to explore EFL teacher professional quality [17,25], but just summarize the profile of teachers' quality from qualitative data analyses, and few have clearly reported on the reliability or validity of the scales based on these frameworks. Building on previous research, Wu [8] summarised a professional profile for excellent EFL teachers in mainland China and systematically illustrated EFL teachers' professional quality from four interconnected dimensions. This profile has been widely accepted in EFL teacher professional quality research in China [8,10].

3. Research Framework

The four-factorial framework for EFL teachers' professional quality proposed by Wu [8] was based on previous research on LTE and development. In Wu's research, English language pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) was conceptualised as teachers' strong command of the knowledge required for PCK [57] and teaching skills. Teacher beliefs referred to beliefs about the foreign language teaching profession and professional ethics, beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning, and beliefs about language teacher learning and development.

In this regard, the four factors identified by Wu [8] were further optimised in the present study as a framework with two modules, namely, English language pedagogical content knowledge and teacher beliefs. Specifically, English language PCK focuses on EFL teachers' strong English subject knowledge and teaching skills. Teacher beliefs refer to teachers' awareness of self-development and their attitudes toward students, language teaching, and learning. More precisely, teacher belief comprises beliefs about language

teacher learning and development (teachers' perceptions of and attitudes towards their professional development), beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning (teachers' cognition of English subject knowledge and language teaching as well as students' language learning, teachers' views on and attitudes towards their profession as well as their moral character). EFL teachers' teaching behaviours mirrored their PCK and were simultaneously influenced by their beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning as well as their professional ethics. Additionally, this relational view was also supported by prior research [10].

The development of EFL teachers' ethics, professional ideology, and teaching beliefs was closely associated with language teachers' teaching experiences and the educational environments in which they operated [62–64]. However, despite the acceptable reliability of this scale based on its four-factorial framework (Cronbach's alpha coefficients ranged from 0.5829 to 0.8724), Wu [8] did not illustrate its validity clearly. Thus, the current study presents a new attempt to adopt this framework and its corresponding scale to examine high school EFL teachers' professional quality. There is also a need to confirm the framework's reliability and validity in EFL teaching contexts. Against this backdrop, the present study endeavours to investigate the professional quality of high school EFL teachers in China's rural areas by answering the following two research questions:

1. What are the global and dimensional profiles of Chinese EFL teachers' professional quality?
2. What are the levels of Chinese EFL teachers' professional quality?

4. Research Methodology

In this section, information regarding participants, research instruments, data collection, and analytical framework will be presented in detail in order to explain the research design.

4.1. Participants

Given the previously established standards for teaching excellence [8,10,24,34,65] and the purpose of large-scale samples, three criteria for selecting experienced rural high school EFL teachers were proposed in this study: no fewer than five years of teaching experience, senior professional titles (High School Senior Teacher), and teaching and scientific research programmes or prizes awarded at or beyond the county level. The final sample comprised 367 experienced EFL teachers from 15 high schools in the northeast part of China, with 139 (37.9%) male teachers and 228 (62.1%) female teachers. Among them, 188 (51.2%) worked in seven junior high schools, and 179 (48.8%) worked in eight senior high schools. EFL teachers with different levels of teaching experience were included; 141 (38.4%) had five to ten years' teaching experience, 122 (33.3%) had ten to twenty years, 61 (16.6%) had twenty to thirty years, and 43 (11.7%) had more than thirty years. According to the contact information in the questionnaire, four voluntary EFL teachers (two male and two female) were selected as interviewees for data triangulation (see Table 1).

Table 1. Basic information about interviewed teachers.

Basic Information	Teacher A	Teacher B	Teacher C	Teacher D
Gender	Male	Female	Male	Female
Level	SHS	JHS	JHS	SHS
Professional Title	Senior	Senior	Senior	Senior
Age	39	34	37	45
Teaching Years	16	8	14	22
Length of Interview	58mins	64mins	52mins	68mins

4.2. Research Instruments

The two major instruments used in this study were a questionnaire and interviews. First, a Questionnaire on High School Teachers' Professional Quality (the data used in this

study is part of a larger study sample, involving EFL teachers from primary and high school teachers in both urban and rural areas, and we developed this questionnaire to collect the data from all these teachers) (see Table 2) was adapted from Wu's [8] Questionnaire on Professional Development of College English Teachers in China. For differences between high school and tertiary English education, items from Wu's questionnaire were revised or deleted. For instance, item 19 ("My use of the textbook is based on the actual situation of the students") was removed because high school EFL teachers are required to use the book assigned by their schools and have limited freedom to select textbooks for their students. Some items were reworded and paired with the unrevised items in the item pool for further examination in terms of appropriacy and accuracy. In the pilot study, we invited 10 experienced high school EFL teachers from three rural schools (one junior high school and two senior high schools) to examine the items. Thirty-four items were ultimately retained to be administered to the participants. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to gather more information about EFL teachers' learning and teaching experience. An interview protocol was employed (see Appendix A) to avoid straying from the topic while providing participants with flexibility for reflection [66].

Table 2. Questionnaire on high school teachers' professional quality.

Scales	Subscales	Items
Teacher beliefs (<i>n</i> = 20)	Beliefs about language teacher learning and development (<i>n</i> = 10)	23–30; 33; 34
	Beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning (<i>n</i> = 10)	8; 10–13; 18–20; 31; 32;
English language pedagogical content knowledge (<i>n</i> = 14)	English knowledge and skills (<i>n</i> = 4)	2–5
	English teaching capacity (<i>n</i> = 10)	1; 6; 7; 9; 14–17; 21; 22

4.3. Data Collection

The electronic questionnaire was distributed in early September 2020 through an online questionnaire platform called Wenjuanxing to high school EFL teachers working in China's rural areas. Participants were encouraged to fill out the questionnaire according to their teaching experience. A total of 524 online questionnaires were collected from 15 high schools (including eight junior and seven senior high schools) across the three provinces of northeast China. Of these, 157 questionnaires were invalid because the teachers did not fulfil the criteria for experienced EFL teachers in our study. Ultimately, 367 valid questionnaires were retained.

Amongst them, there were 20 high school EFL teachers who provided contact information in the questionnaires. However, when we formally invited those teachers to participate in the follow-up interviews, only eight of them accepted the invitation. Five worked in senior high schools and three in junior high schools. We adopted the purposive sampling method and considered their gender difference, teaching experience, and academic achievements; four voluntary EFL teachers (two male and two female) who performed better and won higher teaching and research prizes were chosen for interviews (see Table 1). For example, Teacher D, who was a senior high school EFL teacher, had more than 20 teaching years and got many prizes in provincial and municipal teaching competitions. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in September and October 2020 to capture the participants' professional experiences and feelings. Each interview was carried out in Putonghua for about an hour and audio-recorded with participants' permission. After the interviews, the qualitative data were transcribed by the researchers and checked by the interviewees. All participants were informed of the research purposes and assured that

their personal information would remain confidential. These procedures guaranteed the trustworthiness of the study.

4.4. Data Analysis

All questionnaire data were recorded and analysed using SPSS 26.0. Thirty-four items were analysed using exploratory factor analysis (EFA; $N = 367$) with principal axis factoring (PAF) and varimax. Based on the factorial results from the EFA, we developed a questionnaire on high school teachers' professional quality and then adopted descriptive statistics to examine the levels of experienced EFL high school teachers' professional quality in China's rural areas. In addition, qualitative content analysis was employed to analyse the interview data [67], which was expected to triangulate and enrich the quantitative results.

5. Results

This section answers the two research questions and specifically reports on the global and dimensional profiles and levels of EFL teachers' professional quality.

5.1. Two-Module Profile of EFL Teachers' Professional Quality

5.1.1. Dimension of EFL Teachers' Beliefs

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.950, and Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded $\chi^2 = 4785.716$, $df = 105$, $p = 0.000$, indicating that the data was suitable for EFA. Then, the 20 items relating to teacher beliefs were analysed using EFA with PAF and varimax. As the threshold of factor loading was set at $|0.40|$ [68], two factors of teacher beliefs were extracted and retained after deleting four items (Q18, Q19, Q20, Q24). The pattern in Table 3 shows that the cumulative percentage of total variance explained was 66.833% (above 55%, the referential line for EFA; cf. [69]). All factor loadings were above $|0.40|$, confirming that the two-factor structure of teacher beliefs was acceptable. The alphas for each factor varied from 0.927 to 0.985, indicating the high reliability of this subscale. The two factors were labelled *Beliefs about language teacher learning and development* (Factor 1) and *Beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning* (Factor 2).

Factor 1 comprised all items on *Beliefs about language teacher learning and development* and also involved two new items, Q31 and Q32, which originated from *Beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning*. Item Q31 implies the teachers' responsibility and the critical role of positive environments in constructing a stronger teaching community. Item Q32 further highlights the interconnection between teachers' personal growth and environments. Overall, besides the original items (see Table 3), items Q31 and Q32 highlight that a good context matters in teachers' professional development. Meanwhile, teachers, as active agents, are able to shape the harmonious environments in which they exist and develop. To some degree, this resonates with beliefs about language teacher learning and development [8]. Therefore, Factor 1 was labelled *Beliefs about language teacher learning and development*. Factor 2 was labelled *Beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning*, including student-oriented teaching views (i.e., guiding students in learning the English language effectively and boosting their interest) and teachers' awareness of teaching objectives (i.e., focusing on the humanistic aspect of textbooks and the appropriate adjustment of teaching materials).

Table 3. Pattern matrix of EFL teacher beliefs.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Commonality
Q31 I am responsible for creating a positive atmosphere as a member of the workplace.	0.959	−0.089	0.795
Q30 I like discussing teaching with my colleagues.	0.936	−0.125	0.709
Q32 My personal growth is closely associated with the positive influence of the environment.	0.868	−0.044	0.696
Q33 Further in-service study has consolidated my practical knowledge of teaching.	0.805	0.029	0.685
Q28 I participate in activities that help improve my teaching.	0.780	0.065	0.691
Q34 I make it clear how I can improve my teaching.	0.747	0.110	0.698
Q25 I often reflect on my teaching from students' perspectives.	0.586	0.212	0.542
Q27 I explore different possibilities for promoting students' English learning in the classroom environment.	0.573	0.224	0.579
Q29 I will either participate in or host an academic study program to make my teaching more effective.	0.556	0.146	0.456
Q26 I often think about how to make teaching more effective within our team.	0.551	0.279	0.621
Q23 I have developed self-awareness of how to teach properly.	0.419	0.321	0.487
Q08 I will focus on students' learning methods while providing guidance.	−0.115	0.945	0.737
Q10 I will facilitate students' wholesome growth through teaching.	0.051	0.830	0.757
Q12 I will adjust my teaching based on students' actual performance.	0.094	0.768	0.711
Q11 I will concentrate on humanity when dealing with texts.	0.102	0.748	0.689
Q13 I will focus on students' interest in learning.	0.155	0.718	0.712
Cumulative percentage of variance explained	61.358	66.833	—
Cronbach's alphas	0.943	0.927	0.985

5.1.2. Dimension of EFL Teachers' English Language Pedagogical Content Knowledge

The Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy was 0.928, and Bartlett's test of sphericity yielded $\chi^2 = 3957.366$, $df = 91$, $p = 0.000$, indicating that the data was suitable for EFA. Table 4 shows that the cumulative percentage of total variance explained was 62.813% (above 55%, the referential line for EFA; cf. [69]). All factor loadings were above |0.40|, which confirmed that the two-factor structure was acceptable. Furthermore, the alphas for each factor ranged from 0.921 to 0.942, indicating the high reliability of this subscale. The two factors were labelled *English teaching capacity* (Factor 1) and *English knowledge and skills* (Factor 2).

Factor 1, *English teaching capacity*, focused on teachers' capacity to guide students and successfully achieve teaching objectives. Factor 2, *English knowledge and skills*, covered items from the original questionnaire and added three new items (Q1, Q6, Q7). These underscore EFL teachers' teaching experience and cognition related to students' learning.

A conclusive picture of the professional quality of EFL teachers in rural areas was characterised by a two-module, four-factor structure. Specifically, this structure referred to teacher beliefs (beliefs about language teacher learning and development, beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning) and English language PCK (English teaching capacity, English knowledge and skills). The overall profile resembled Wu's [8] structure of professional quality of foreign language teachers in higher education, but there were small discrepancies in item distribution. For example, in the present study, the effects of the interplay between teachers and environments on teachers' professional development were emphasised in the newly supplemented item Q32, which was included in Factor 1 in order to enrich Wu's [8] research into teacher beliefs.

Table 4. Pattern matrix of EFL teachers' English language pedagogical content knowledge.

	Factor 1	Factor 2	Commonality
Q16 I stress the importance of fundamental language.	0.854	−0.037	0.687
Q14 I am able to combine student interest with teaching objectives.	0.841	−0.044	0.658
Q17 I arrange language activities from the easiest to the hardest.	0.821	0.004	0.678
Q22 I will seek chances to create learning moments for students to learn.	0.809	0.007	0.662
Q21 I will bring up students' awareness of language by grasping chances.	0.804	0.028	0.678
Q15 Interaction between teachers and students is intended to achieve teaching objectives.	0.738	0.064	0.614
Q09 I was agreeable with students.	0.465	0.260	0.452
Q02 I am equipped with abilities that will make me qualified for teaching.	−0.113	0.924	0.721
Q03 I have a solid knowledge.	0.001	0.804	0.647
Q01 I have accumulated rich experience in classroom teaching.	−0.073	0.724	0.457
Q04 I can handle questions raised by students.	0.117	0.719	0.648
Q06 I am clear about students' anticipated learning difficulties.	0.284	0.602	0.681
Q07 I can identify deviation in students' learning in a timely manner.	0.305	0.560	0.644
Q05 I know where to find answers during class preparations.	0.276	0.535	0.567
Cumulative percentage of variance explained	55.339	62.813	—
Cronbach's alpha	0.921	0.913	0.942

5.2. Levels of EFL Teachers' Professional Quality

Table 5 presents details of the levels of high school EFL teachers' professional quality at both a global and dimensional level. Responses using the five-point Likert scale employed in the current study indicated that EFL teachers had high professional quality ($M = 4.62$; $SD = 0.47$), strong teacher beliefs ($M = 4.62$), and solid English language PCK ($M = 4.63$).

Table 5. The results of descriptive analysis of teachers' professional quality.

Scales	Subscales	Min	Max	M	SD
Teacher beliefs ($M = 4.62$, $SD = 0.50$)	Beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning	1.00	5.00	4.64	0.54
	Beliefs about language teacher learning and development	1.00	5.00	4.61	0.51
English language pedagogical content knowledge ($M = 4.63$, $SD = 0.47$)	English teaching capacity	1.00	5.00	4.58	0.55
	English knowledge and skills	1.00	5.00	4.67	0.47
Global professional quality	—	1.17	5.00	4.62	0.47

As shown in Table 5. The EFL teachers had strong beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning ($M = 4.64$, $SD = 0.54$). The qualitative interview data supported this result, as illustrated in a statement by Teacher A (male), describing his strong beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning ($M = 4.80$):

Teachers should focus on guiding students. No matter how well teachers perform in teaching practice; without students' active participation or suitable teaching arrangements, all of our work will be in vain. (Teacher A)

Teacher A had strong beliefs about student-oriented teaching and emphasised teachers' earnest endeavours to stimulate students' interest in engaging in English learning. The results also revealed that EFL teachers possessed more profound beliefs about language teacher learning and development ($M = 4.61$; $SD = 0.51$). For example, Teacher B (female) had an intense belief in language teacher learning and development. She emphasised the role of a good working environment and trusting relationships among teachers in promoting teachers' professional development:

A good working environment was conducive to teachers' growth. English teachers asked their colleagues for help when facing teaching difficulties so that they were able to come to rapid solutions and make great progress. (Teacher B)

It is noteworthy that item Q29 ("I will either participate in or host an academic study program to make my teaching more effective") in this dimension presents a higher level ($M = 4.40$). This indicated that participating in academic research was a critical aspect of EFL teachers' professional development. However, teachers appeared to find it difficult to identify a feasible avenue to develop their academic study ability. In one interview, Teacher C (Male), who scored highly on this item ($M = 4.00$), emphasised the gaps between teachers' high expectations and practice in academic studies:

Academic study was beneficial to updating my teaching beliefs and engaging me in continuous reflection. However, I found it difficult to read some books on research methods because I had never learned them before and did not have enough time and energy to read them. I did not know how to apply such theoretical knowledge to teaching practice. Indeed, it was hard to conduct an academic study. (Teacher C)

Qualified teachers also presented with greater English teaching knowledge ($M = 4.58$; $SD = 0.55$) and powerful English knowledge and skills ($M = 4.67$; $SD = 0.47$). This result was also supported by the findings of a prior study [8], which suggested that strong English teaching knowledge was a salient sign of teacher effectiveness, as Teacher D (female), who had good English teaching knowledge, explained in her interview:

I was able to effectively interpret why the activities in the new textbooks were designed. Meanwhile, I tended to put my own understanding into language teaching. Perhaps this was why I performed better than others in the textbook analysis [. . .] Students also raised some unexpected and challenging questions many times, but I could cope smoothly with many years of teaching experiences. (Teacher D).

6. Discussion

According to the findings, a further explanation on the structure and levels of EFL teachers' professional quality is necessary in order to unpack experienced EFL teachers' professional quality and their teaching beliefs.

6.1. Profile of EFL Teachers' Professional Quality

This study demonstrated the two-module, four-factor inner structure of the professional quality of experienced EFL teachers in rural areas in China. The first module described teacher beliefs, including beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning and beliefs about language teacher learning and development. The second module described English language teachers' PCK, specifically concerning English teaching capacity and English knowledge and skills. The results confirm Wu's [8] structure of excellent EFL teachers' professional quality, systematically integrating her four factors into teacher beliefs and English language PCK. In addition, unlike Wu's [8] research, the structure developed in the current study, to some extent, highlighted the importance of a positive environment and EFL teachers' developmental process through continuous learning, exploration, and practice, as reflected in items 31 and 32. This finding illustrates the interaction and interconnection between humans and environments from an ecological perspective [70], echoing this ecological turn in LTE [10,71,72]. Teaching context, which is closely related to personal and social-cultural contexts, shapes teachers' cognition, teaching, and learning style [37,73,74]. The EFL teachers, such as Teacher B, affirmed the positive role of teaching context in teacher development; conversely, they also attempted to draw upon contextual resources to solve problems.

In addition, the results showed that experienced EFL teachers focused on student-centred teaching, which was pertinent to their beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning. They designed diversified teaching content and employed teaching strategies to meet students' different needs and interests [11,15,54,61]. They simultaneously considered different cultural settings [54] and assessed prior teaching and learning experience. Teacher

A stated that “without students’ active participation or suitable teaching arrangements, all of our work will be in vain”, revealing that the student-oriented teaching beliefs affected the EFL teachers’ emotion [11]. In addition, experienced EFL teachers had sufficient English capacity and skills and English teaching knowledge after years of teaching and learning experience and academic studies; these were necessary conditions for strengthening their professional quality [10,44,46].

6.2. Levels of EFL Teachers’ Professional Quality

The data analysis indicated that experienced high school EFL teachers had stronger teacher beliefs and teaching knowledge. This result was partly supported by prior empirical research [10], which found that qualified EFL teachers had strong beliefs (i.e., pursuing lifelong learning, developing students’ competence and minds) and PCK (i.e., advocating for interest-oriented teaching and effective teacher-student interaction). These teachers take the initiative to learn new knowledge, accept new ideas, and explore new teaching methods to improve their professional quality.

There are several possible explanations for the high levels of professional quality exhibited by the experienced EFL teachers. First, the experienced EFL teachers possessed stronger beliefs about what English language teaching and learning was and how to teach the English language more effectively. With a greater understanding of the reciprocal interaction between teacher beliefs and practice, good EFL teachers are adept at reflecting on their teaching performance and thus gaining experience [36,50]. Years of teaching experience can inspire teachers to concentrate on the important role of students and adjust their teaching strategies to enhance students’ learning motivation [33]. For example, in their interview, Teacher A stated that “Teachers should focus on guiding students”, revealing that student-centred foreign language teaching beliefs were deeply imprinted in EFL teachers’ minds. Second, the experienced EFL teachers had strong beliefs about cultivating and improving their knowledge through continuous learning, but they sometimes performed discordantly in beliefs and practice [8]. For example, Teacher C realised the importance of academic studies but did not know how to conduct research. This was possibly due to a lack of professional training and opportunities to participate in multiple academic studies in their professional trajectory. Therefore, it was an inspirational step to focus on teachers’ beliefs about constant learning and enhance their awareness of self-development in language teaching and academic research. Third, the experienced EFL teachers showcased higher English language PCK, which primarily manifested in their good English knowledge and skills as well as English teaching capacity. This might be partly attributed to the teachers’ extensive teaching and active engagement in exploration and reflection [12,34,37,43,59]. Previous empirical research has found that other teacher-related factors are also beneficial in developing EFL teachers’ professional quality, such as EFL teachers’ professional commitment, identity, and motivation and social negotiation between teachers and other important figures [10,25,75]. The EFL teachers were situated in changing environments where they could employ favourable contextual and personal resources to navigate multiple teaching challenges and construct their professional quality from a social developmental perspective [10,12].

7. Conclusions and Implications

This paper discussed the professional quality of experienced EFL teachers in China’s rural areas via a mixed-methods approach and provided a more comprehensive evaluation concept that contributes to sustainable improvement of competence-based teaching in rural areas in Chinese educational institutions. The results of EFA yielded a two-module, four-factor structure of experienced EFL teachers’ professional quality, namely, teacher beliefs (i.e., beliefs about language teacher learning and development, beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning) and English language PCK (i.e., English teaching capacity, English knowledge and skills). The EFA, which was not conducted in the previous study, validated Wu’s [8] framework. This validation provides research support for the

application of Wu's framework. More importantly, the questionnaire has been proven to be a useful tool to examine high school EFL teachers' professional quality. Studies of the professional quality of teachers in other subjects can also refer to this questionnaire when exploring teachers' professional quality in future research. We found that Chinese rural high school EFL teachers still displayed higher professional quality, even though they had lower income and challenging working conditions than those in urban areas. Notably, the synergic effects of teachers' inner strengths (e.g., teaching experience, stronger educational beliefs, and capacity) and external resources (e.g., teacher–teacher cooperation, good classroom environments) contributed to the development of their professional quality [10]. In addition, EFL teachers were not only affected by their surrounding ecological factors (i.e., student, classroom, colleagues, and academic research), but could consciously take feasible strategies to satisfy students' interest and their own need, such as creating a positive atmosphere as a member of the workplace, discussing with colleagues, and engaging in activities. In the interactive process, EFL teachers, as agentic and developing persons [70,76], were able to shape and develop their professional quality [10]. To a large degree, teacher quality shaped and was shaped in the contexts in which they lived, echoing the ecological turn in the field of foreign language teacher education [10,71,72]. Furthermore, prior studies were inclined to adopt qualitative [12,17] or quantitative [14,16] research design to explore teachers' professional quality, but this study focused on EFL teachers in rural areas and uncovered the global and dimensional profiles of their professional quality using mixed research methods. Thus, it might be a timely addition to the literature.

This study has several implications for maintaining EFL teachers' professional quality and promoting sustainable development in their career trajectories. First, although experienced EFL teachers in rural schools have higher levels of professional quality, their salaries and working resources are unevenly distributed compared with teachers in urban schools. Therefore, for rural education development, adequate financial and resource support should be provided to these teachers, especially in extremely adverse contexts. Second, a network of professional learning communities for EFL teachers should be constructed to preserve and promote EFL teachers' professional development. Experienced EFL teachers in different rural high schools can expand their knowledge of language teaching and education by attending lectures by experts in the field of education, and can also share their teaching experiences with community members via platforms online. The construction of a network of experienced EFL teachers can also help maximise their roles in enhancing the professional quality of novice teachers. Third, school administrators can invite excellent EFL teachers to offer practical advice and guidance to facilitate teachers' understanding of pedagogical theories and to share their teaching and research experience, thus broadening the horizons of novice and in-service EFL teachers working in under-developed contexts. Teachers' professionalism can also be enhanced by actively seeking opportunities for collegial dialogue, collaborative activities (e.g., joint lesson planning and demonstration lessons), problem-solving, and community building in a much broader educational settings and administrative system [77]. In addition, it is possible to establish school-level workshops, with teachers of all grades as the core members, connecting EFL teachers of different levels in the school and creating opportunities for teachers to promote teaching through school-based research.

It is worth mentioning that teachers living in the post-COVID-19 pandemic period should make full use of the advantages of the Internet and other emerging technologies in constructing a virtual professional learning community to foster teacher development [78]. Furthermore, it is recommended that multiple appropriate assessments should be considered by policymakers and conducted by educational administrators. In the face of various challenges, it is vital to help EFL teachers construct a positive ecological environment, thus promoting sustainable professional development.

Although this research endeavoured to depict a comprehensive picture of EFL teachers' professional quality, it has some limitations. First, both the interview and questionnaire sample sizes were somewhat small, and the interviews have yet to be expanded. Therefore,

future studies should enlarge the research sample and validate the questionnaire used in this study to enrich the research on EFL teachers' professional quality. Second, the structure of EFL teachers' professional quality was explored in this study via EFA. Researchers interested in this topic can further validate the structure of EFA and explore the construction and development of EFL teachers' professional quality through longitudinal qualitative studies. Nevertheless, overall, this empirical research on what constitutes the professional quality of experienced EFL teachers in rural areas has been delineated through factor analysis that echoes Wu's [8] framework. It is hoped that these findings provide a valuable measurement instrument and empirical reference for future research.

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Appendix A. An Interview Protocol

1. What qualities do you think experienced EFL teachers should have?
2. What do you think of English language teaching and learning based on your teaching experiences?
3. What do you think of the relationship between your teaching environment and professional development?
4. How do you understand the relationship between academic study and teaching?
5. What knowledge and skills are necessary for EFL teachers' effective teaching?

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