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2024 International Conference on Business Economics, Education, Arts and Social Sciences (EASS 2024)

Understanding EFL Teachers' Occupational Anxiety under Double Reduction Policy

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Abstract: This study investigates the impact of China's Double Reduction policy on the occupational anxiety (OA) and well-being of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in secondary schools in Shenzhen. Through interviews with six EFL teachers, the research identifies three main sources of increased workload: the introduction of after-school services, changes in homework design, and the expansion of teaching content. The findings reveal that these changes have led to significant stress, role ambiguity, and pressure from both parents and educational institutions. Despite the policy's intent to reduce student workload, teachers reported an increase in their responsibilities, resulting in heightened OA and job dissatisfaction. The study also explores coping strategies, such as rest, relaxation, and institutional support like collective lesson planning and flexible work arrangements. However, it underscores the importance of systemic interventions, including professional development and clear policy implementation, to alleviate teacher stress. The research highlights the critical need for comprehensive support systems to safeguard teacher well-being and ensure the effective implementation of educational reforms.

Keywords: Occupational Anxiety (OA); Double Reduction policy; EFL teachers; coping strategies

Published: 28 November 2024



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1. Introduction

China's National College Entrance Examination (Gaokao) has long shaped its education system, fostering exam-oriented practices that increase student burdens, parental anxiety, and educational misconduct (Zhang, 2021; Li & Li, 2022). In response, the Double Reduction policy was introduced in July 2021 to reduce homework, regulate private tutoring, and shift education from talent selection to talent cultivation (MoE, 2021). While research on the policy has primarily focused on its effects on students, parents, and training institutions (Wu, 2021; Xue & Tan, 2022), its impact on teachers has been underexplored. Recent studies suggest that the policy has extended teachers' working hours, increased workloads, and raised teaching standards, leading to greater stress and anxiety (Yue et al., 2023). However, empirical research on how these changes affect teachers' well-being and professional development remains limited, highlighting the need for further investigation.

English is a compulsory subject in Chinese junior high schools and is widely regarded as essential for students' academic success and future prospects (Hao & Yin, 2015; Liu, 2022). EFL teachers face significant occupational anxiety due to parental expectations,

particularly regarding the Secondary School Entrance Examination (SHSEE), which emphasizes strong performance in English (Jin et al., 2021). In addition to typical pressures, EFL teachers experience unique challenges, including cross-cultural demands, language anxiety, and changes in social and professional status (Jin et al., 2021). Despite these challenges, little research has examined the impact of the Double Reduction policy on EFL teachers' occupational anxiety, making it essential to address this gap and understand how policy changes have affected their roles and well-being.

This study adopts a qualitative approach to explore the occupational anxiety experienced by EFL teachers in Shenzhen secondary schools under the Double Reduction policy and the coping mechanisms they use. The research is guided by two questions:

RQ1: How do EFL teachers in Shenzhen perceive the impact of the Double Reduction policy on their occupational anxiety and well-being?

RQ2: How do they cope with occupational anxiety?

Using semi-structured interviews with six teachers recruited through snowball sampling, the study captures rich, detailed insights into their experiences. Thematic Analysis, following Braun and Clarke (2006), was employed to identify patterns and themes within the data. This research aims to address the gaps in the literature by shedding light on the lived experiences of EFL teachers under the policy and informing strategies to support their well-being.

2. Literature Review

This section explores the concepts of teacher professional well-being (PWB) and occupational anxiety (OA), with a focus on Chinese EFL teachers, using Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological framework to examine the multifaceted nature of these phenomena. Teachers' PWB, encompassing physical, psychological, and social dimensions, reflects their overall satisfaction with their professional lives. Seligman's (2011) PERMA model and Kern et al.'s (2014) five domains, emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement, highlight the complexity of PWB. Negative aspects, such as stress and burn-out, are prevalent in the teaching profession, often leading to attrition and dissatisfaction (European Commission, 2013).

OA, a critical element of PWB, is defined as tension, worry, and stress arising from conflicts and pressures in professional responsibilities, resulting in adverse psychological and physiological outcomes (Kyriacou, 1980; Arockiasamy & Subramanian, 2021). It reflects ongoing challenges that hinder teachers' performance and well-being, often manifesting as prolonged exhaustion or detachment (Saxena & Manjrekar, 2020). These challenges are particularly pronounced for EFL teachers in China, who face unique stressors, including high parental expectations, cross-cultural demands, and language anxiety, compounded by reforms such as the Double Reduction policy.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory provides a comprehensive framework to understand OA, categorizing influences into four levels. At the macrosystem level, societal norms, technological advancements, and policies like the Double Reduction reform exacerbate stress by increasing accountability and reshaping the educational landscape (Yue et al., 2023; Xue & Tan, 2022). The exosystem involves broader institutional structures, including school policies and administrative decisions, which significantly impact teachers' workloads and resource availability. Effective administrative support, such as clear communication and resource provision, can alleviate stress, while its absence exacerbates anxiety (İpek et al., 2018). The mesosystem highlights interactions between teachers and their environment, such as relationships with parents, colleagues, and students. Positive collaboration and supportive peer networks can mitigate OA, whereas conflictual interactions increase stress (Collie et al., 2012). At the microsystem level, individual resilience, coping strategies, and professional identity play vital roles in managing anxiety. Teachers with strong professional identities and effective coping mechanisms are better equipped to handle occupational pressures (Troesch & Bauer, 2017).

The impact of OA on teachers is profound, influencing their health, emotions, and professional performance. Studies link OA to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and attrition (Mearns & Cain, 2003; Darling-Hammond, 2010). In China, the Double Reduction policy has intensified OA by increasing teachers' workload and accountability, requiring them to meet heightened teaching standards within limited classroom hours (Jin et al., 2021; Yue et al., 2023). For EFL teachers, these challenges are compounded by language-related pressures, such as maintaining fluency, meeting cross-cultural demands, and addressing learners' diverse needs (Jin et al., 2021).

Effective coping strategies are crucial for managing OA. Personal efforts, such as professional development, time management, and self-care practices, enhance resilience and reduce stress (Darling-Hammond, 2010; Liu, 2022). However, maladaptive coping strategies, like avoidance, can exacerbate anxiety (Mearns & Cain, 2003). External support systems, including mentoring, administrative backing, and workplace initiatives, significantly contribute to reducing OA. Administrative support and collaborative environments foster a sense of stability, while strong social support systems among family, colleagues, and supervisors reduce anxiety and enhance well-being (Agyapong et al., 2022).

In summary, teachers' occupational anxiety results from a complex interplay of individual, institutional, and systemic factors. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that combines personal resilience with systemic support, ensuring that teachers are equipped to navigate the demands of evolving educational contexts.

3. Methodology

The study uses a qualitative approach to provide an in-depth exploration of teachers' experiences, which is essential for understanding complex and context-specific phenomena (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The research addresses two primary questions:

RQ1: How do English teachers in a secondary school in Shenzhen perceive the impact of the Double Reduction policy on their occupational anxiety and well-being?

RQ2: How do they cope with occupational anxiety?

The study adopts interpretivism and constructivism as its philosophical underpinnings. Interpretivism emphasizes the subjective and socially constructed nature of teachers' experiences, recognizing that their perceptions of OA are shaped by unique interactions and contexts (Sparkes & Smith, 2014). Constructivism complements this by acknowledging that each teacher's reality is individually constructed based on personal and contextual factors (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Together, these approaches provide a framework for understanding the complexity and diversity of teachers' lived experiences and coping mechanisms within the context of the Double Reduction policy.

A qualitative methodology was chosen to capture the rich, detailed insights necessary for understanding participants' interpretations of their experiences (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Although phenomenology and ethnography were considered, they were deemed unsuitable because the study focuses on individual perceptions of OA rather than a specific phenomenon or cultural analysis. Semi-structured interviews were selected as the primary data collection method for their flexibility and ability to generate nuanced data.

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit six EFL teachers from Shenzhen who met the criteria of being current secondary school teachers with over three years of teaching experience. This ensured participants had sufficient familiarity with the Double Reduction policy to provide meaningful insights (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). These participants were chosen to represent a range of perspectives, allowing for a deeper understanding of how the policy impacts occupational anxiety and coping strategies.

Six EFL teachers from Shenzhen were recruited for the research through purposive sampling, all of whom had experienced the changes brought by the implementation of the Double Reduction policy. Detailed information about the participants is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant details.

i.d.	Name	Age	Time of Teaching	Current Teaching Grade	Other administrative responsibilities
A	Ida	26-30	3-5 years	Grade 9	Member of the party committee
B	Joy	26-30	3-5 years	Grade 8	Leader of lesson Preparation Group
C	Elva	26-30	3-5 years	Grade 8	None
D	Sammi	26-30	5-10 years	Grade 9	None
E	Emma	26-30	3-5 years	Grade 8	None
G	Sunny	31-35	3-5 years	Grade 9	Leader of lesson Preparation Group

4. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary data collection method for their flexibility and ability to generate rich and detailed qualitative data, and because they represent a style commonly used in social research (Brinkmann, 2013). Semi-structured interviews offer a middle ground that allows researchers to follow a set of prepared questions while pursuing interesting and relevant topics that arise spontaneously during the conversation (Blakeslee & Fleischer, 2009).

The choice of semi-structured interviews aligns with the requirements of qualitative research, which sets out to understand narrative experiences and phenomena from the perspectives of those who are experiencing them, emphasising depth over breadth (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher sufficient time for an in-depth exploration of participants’ thoughts, feelings and experiences (Patton, 2015) while providing a structured framework to guide the conversation (Brinkmann, 2013). Rich data about EFL teachers’ perceptions of occupational anxiety under the Double Reduction policy can therefore be obtained and used to support the discussion.

Two pilot interviews were conducted to identify potential issues in the formal interviews and to refine the research approach used (McGrath et al., 2019). Two EFL teachers who met the criteria of recruitment and did not participate in the formal interview process were chosen for the pilot interviews, and questions were revised based on the results of these interviews to gain richer information about occupational anxiety under the Double Reduction policy.

Formal Interviews were held individually with six participants using Microsoft Teams, each of which lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with the participants’ consent and transcribed for analysis. The detailed timeline is shown in Figure 1.

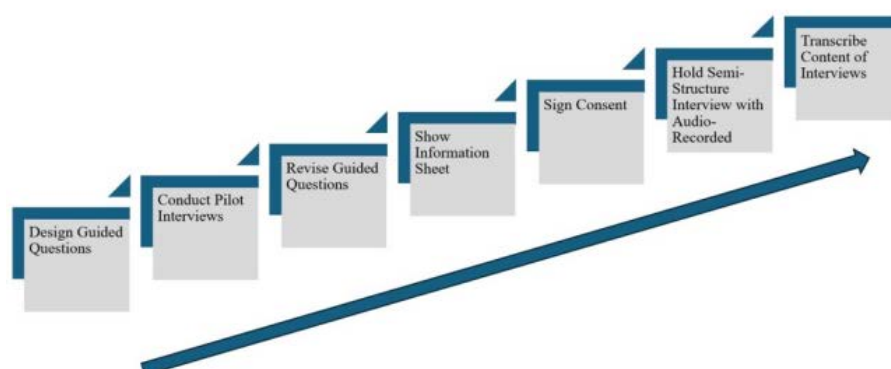


Figure 1. Timeline of Data Collection.

5. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse interview transcriptions following the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006). The reason for choosing thematic analysis was its flexibility, which allows it to be used within various theoretical frameworks to answer different research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This made it suitable and adaptable to the specific needs of this research. Meanwhile, its accessibility makes it straightforward to learn and apply, which can be beneficial for researchers (Creswell & Creswell, 2018).

Six steps were involved in the analytical process, allowing the researcher to familiarise herself with the original data and identify meaningful groups of data. The data showed the teachers’ perceptions of the Double Reduction policy and its impact on their OA, and were then used to support the discussion. The detailed steps are shown in Figure 2.

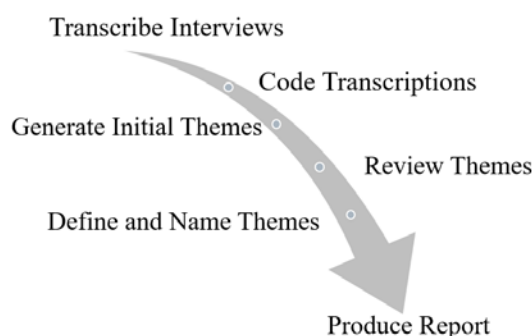


Figure 2. Process of Data Analysis.

6. Findings

6.1. Increased Workload and Occupational Anxiety

This section examines the impact of the Double Reduction policy on EFL teachers' work, well-being, and occupational anxiety (OA), while also analyzing the strategies they employed to address these challenges. Six EFL teachers provided detailed accounts of how the policy has reshaped their professional responsibilities and affected their overall well-being. Participants unanimously agreed that the implementation of the Double Reduction policy has significantly increased their workload, primarily in three areas: the addition of new responsibilities, changes in assignment design, and the expansion of teaching content. All respondents noted substantial changes in their work following the policy's implementation, particularly the newly introduced responsibility of managing after-school services. Although teachers are not required to supervise after-school services every day, five of the six participants (excluding Participant B) reported that this new responsibility disrupted their work schedules, extended their working hours, and had a notable impact on both their professional and personal lives. These additional duties made it increasingly difficult for teachers to balance teaching and other responsibilities. Table 2 provides a detailed overview of the specific changes reported by the participants, illustrating the extensive impact of managing after-school services on their schedules and workload.

Table 2. Impact of the Double Reduction Policy on After-School Service.

Participant	Statement
A	<i>“If I am responsible for after-school services that day, I need to manage the students during that time. Although I do not need to teach, I need to answer students’ questions, similar to an open Q&A session.”</i>
C	<i>“Our school also added after-school services, but I needed to teach during that time, which counts as part of my regular teaching hours.”</i>

D	<i>"I managed the students while they did their homework. I did not teach, but I answer English-related questions. I finished work close to 6 PM."</i>
E	<i>"When students come to me with questions, I have to stay in the classroom until 6 PM. By the time I get home, it's already 7 PM."</i>
F	<i>"As the head of the lesson planning group, I already have a lot of work. If I am responsible for after-school services, I cannot return to the office to work, so other tasks must be delayed."</i>

Because of differences in policies and management approaches at individual schools, the frequency at which the teachers took on after-school service responsibilities varied. While Participants A, D and E were responsible for after-school services roughly once every 2-3 weeks, Participants C and F undertook these responsibilities weekly.

It was clear from the accounts of the five EFL teachers that the frequency of after-school service duties varied between schools, but overall the teachers' workloads increased. The introduction of after-school services was intended to reduce study pressure on students outside of school hours, but it had the effect of imposing increased work burdens and pressures on teachers even though they were paid extra to provide these additional services. During their interviews, Participants A, C and D described the impact of after-school services on their lives using terms like "troublesome", "annoying", and "frustrating", demonstrating the effects of OA.

6.2. Changes in Homework Design

EFL teachers' increased workload was also manifested in aspects of homework design. The interviewees noted that they had to alter their approach to the design of homework to comply with the Double Reduction policy. This involved reducing the amount of homework given, diversifying homework formats and designing differentiated homework assignments. Table 3 outlines some of the specific changes mentioned by study participants.

Table 3. Impact of the Double Reduction Policy on Homework Design.

Participant	Summary of Statements
5	<i>"Previously, EFL teachers didn't need to consider time constraints when assigning homework. Now, they must ensure that homework can be completed in around 20 minutes and cannot exceed 30 minutes."</i>
4	<i>"Now, EFL teachers need to divide students into different levels based on their English proficiency. The homework assigned varies according to the different levels of students."</i>
5	<i>"EFL teachers have now reduced the amount of written homework and increased activities such as vlog recording, storytelling competitions, speech contests and drama performances."</i>

To comply with the Double Reduction policy, EFL teachers had to redesign homework strategies, as their previous practices were no longer suitable. Participants reported that creating effective assignments to improve students' English proficiency within a shorter timeframe increased their workload. While the changes benefited students, all six teachers found them burdensome and stressful, offering no advantages to the teachers themselves. Some participants described the rapid need for adaptation as "anxious" and "nervous" (Participants B, C, F, E). Three participants implemented differentiated assignments to reduce students' homework burdens, dividing them into three proficiency levels and designing specific tasks for each group. This added complexity to assigning, collecting, and grading homework, requiring more time and effort. Participant C referred to the process as "a burden." The policy's demand for shorter homework completion times also required teachers to adopt new formats to enhance learning efficiency. Teachers had to take on tasks such as designing, implementing, supervising, and evaluating new activities,

which became part of their regular workload. For example, Participant F described preparing students for English dramatic performances, which involved selecting scripts, guiding rehearsals, ensuring safety, and managing logistics like venues and costumes. These additional responsibilities significantly increased workload, time demands, and stress, contributing to OA. Table 4 summarizes participants' experiences, highlighting the added effort, time, and energy required for these changes.

Table 4. Changes in Homework Formats and Teachers' Perceptions.

Participant	Changes in homework format	Perception of changes
A	<i>"I added non-written assignments for students, such as English speech competitions and English video dubbing contests, mainly to improve their speaking skills."</i>	<i>"This process definitely requires extra time and effort."</i>
B	<i>"Students have new assignments like English storytelling competitions and English song contests."</i>	<i>"Since I'm not in charge, I don't have much say in any of this."</i>
C	<i>"Students make English vlogs during holidays to share their lives."</i>	<i>"I'm trying harder to keep up with the policy requirements, which have become more troublesome and increased my workload."</i>
D	<i>"Students make English vlogs during summer/winter vacation to share their lives."</i>	<i>"I think it is a burden to comment on their vlogs."</i>
E	<i>"Added activities like making English posters and English dubbing were part of homework innovation."</i>	<i>"My tasks have increased."</i>
F	<i>"I collaborated with students to complete two English drama performances."</i>	<i>"This process was very stressful."</i>

6.3. Increase in Teaching Content

The Double Reduction policy further increased some EFL teachers' workloads by introducing new teaching content for seventh and eighth grades. Participants A, E, and F noted that they were now required to teach content not typically covered at these levels. This change stemmed from the policy's emphasis on process-oriented assessments rather than traditional exam-focused evaluations, which affected the foundational English skills of junior high school students. Participants highlighted that the fifth and sixth grades are crucial for developing basic grammar, sentence construction, and reading skills, serving as a bridge between primary and secondary education. However, the new evaluation system left gaps in students' English proficiency, with many new seventh-grade students lacking the expected foundational knowledge. As a result, the teachers had to incorporate primary-level material into their junior high school lessons to address these gaps and ensure students met proficiency standards. They emphasized that this issue is likely to persist for future cohorts of new seventh-grade students. Table 5 summarizes the actions taken by the teachers, who reported increased workload, teaching pressure, and the need to address additional considerations in their work.

Table 5. Teachers' Responses to Gaps in Students' English Knowledge.

Participant	Statement
A	<i>"The grammar of the present simple tense is typically covered in primary school, but many students in my class did not know it. I had to include this topic in my seventh-grade teaching plan."</i>

E	<i>"Many students lacked the ability to read long texts, so I prepared some long-text reading materials in my seventh-grade curriculum and organised student learning activities."</i>
F	<i>"This change mainly affected grammar learning. Students lacked a systematic foundation of grammar knowledge, so I had to supplement many grammar points during class."</i>

To summarise this increased workload, the six EFL teachers I interviewed saw it as one of the main impacts of the Double Reduction policy. The teaching contexts in which the study’s participants work differed, and their situations differed accordingly, but the three aspects of increased workload outlined above were mentioned repeatedly during the interviews.

Overall, the additional workload has had a negative impact on the participants of this study. Participants regularly used terms like “anxious”, “high pressure” and “frustrating” when discussing the changes. These expressions aligned with the definition of OA used in this study, suggesting that the policy has had a negative impact on teachers’ professional well-being at a psychological level.

6.4. Pressure from Parents and Educational Institutions

The data showed that as well as the challenges posed by changes in EFL teachers’ work content, further issues also arose from parents, including lack of understanding, support and additional demands.

As noted above, EFL teachers were compelled to use various new forms of homework designed to comply with the Double Reduction policy while ensuring that their students still learned effectively. These efforts did not always meet with parental approval and understanding, and several participants recounted instances of parents questioning their children’s homework arrangements and refusing to cooperate with teachers’ work (Table 6).

Table 6. Parents’ Attitudes Towards Teachers’ Homework Arrangements.

Participant	Parents’ Attitudes
A	<i>"Parents believe that after the implementation of the Double Reduction policy, the responsibility for students’ English learning lies entirely with the teachers, and parents should not have any burden or responsibility in this regard."</i>
C	<i>"Parents think that the new homework formats are a waste of time and do not directly help with English learning."</i>
F	<i>"Parents do not understand the new homework formats and believe that traditional methods are more effective."</i>

Participants frequently communicate with parents to explain the purpose and value of new homework formats, which adds to the stress of adapting to these changes. They also emphasize the need for parental cooperation and recognition of their role in children’s English learning. The Double Reduction policy increases teachers’ workload and stress, particularly due to parental pressure.

Parental anxiety about academic performance further heightens this pressure. While the policy aims to reduce students’ workload, parents continue to prioritize high SHSEE scores, forcing teachers to balance policy demands with parental expectations. Teachers describe this conflict as troubling and contradictory. This reflects role ambiguity and conflict in teachers’ professional identity, leading to negative emotions and occupational anxiety (OA).

Schools are also a significant source of stress. All participants note excessive demands from administrators, including daily homework reports and random inspections to ensure compliance with the policy. Participant A mentions that these practices greatly increase her OA.

Despite efforts to reduce student workloads, schools maintain high expectations for SHSEE performance, requiring teachers to design homework that adheres to policy guidelines while improving academic outcomes. Participant D highlights the difficulty of meeting these dual demands, which leaves teachers feeling conflicted and pressured. Overall, administrative and parental pressures exacerbate role ambiguity and negatively impact teachers' well-being.

6.5. Consequences of EFL Teachers' Occupational Anxiety

Based on the interviews, all six EFL teachers indicated that OA impacted their emotions but also influenced their intention to change jobs.

In Section 4.2 I described how teachers viewed some of the changes instituted under the Double Reduction policy as "additional burdens" that led them to feel "anxious", "nervous", "troubled", "conflicted", and "frustrated".

The impact of OA on EFL teachers was also manifested in terms of job satisfaction. Although the participants were not directly asked about their level of job satisfaction, all six of them expressed the intention to change jobs in the interviews. Half of the study's participants expressed a desire to leave the teaching profession altogether, while the other half wanted to switch subjects or to teach at different grade levels. Their responses are shown in Table 7.

Table 7. Teachers' Intentions to Change Jobs.

Participant	Intention to change job
A	<i>"I now prefer to teach high school students because high school parents generally do not make excessive demands on teachers."</i>
B	<i>"If I had the chance, I would definitely not choose to be a teacher anymore. There is too much work now."</i>
C	<i>"I've been thinking about changing jobs every day recently, even seriously considering what I could do other than being an English teacher."</i>
D	<i>"I'm planning to teach other subjects, especially geography or history, but I'm not ready yet."</i>
E	<i>"Last term I almost told my supervisor that I wanted to quit. In moments of impulsiveness, I really felt like I didn't want to be a teacher anymore."</i>
F	<i>"Given the opportunity, I would prefer to stay in higher education. To be honest, I enjoy the academic research process."</i>

All six participants experienced the desire to change jobs since the introduction of the Double Reduction policy, although the degree of their intentions at the time of the interviews varied. Four of six participants explicitly associated their desire to change jobs with the changes brought about by the Double Reduction policy.

6.6. Coping Strategies for Occupational Anxiety

During their interviews, all six EFL teachers outlined the range of strategies they had adopted to cope with the OA they had experienced as a result of the changes introduced under the Double Reduction policy when they were asked how they coped with occupational anxiety.

The main coping strategy highlighted by the teachers was taking enough rest to alleviate the excessive workloads and pressures of their jobs. They believed that taking adequate rest after work and at weekends was essential. Table 8 shows the specific actions they took during their rest periods.

Table 8. Teachers’ Rest and Relaxation Activities.

Participant	Actions
A	<i>“I mainly adjust by resting on weekends, mostly sleeping at home.”</i>
B	<i>“I make the most of holiday time, especially winter and summer breaks, by travelling.”</i>
C	<i>“I visit exhibitions and get massages on weekends, which are very important to me.”</i>
D	<i>“I don’t have any specific way to rest; just staying at home is very relaxing for me.”</i>
E	<i>“After work, I completely avoid thinking about work-related matters, effectively separating work from personal life.”</i>
F	<i>“I exercise and work out after work, which I find to be a way to recharge myself.”</i>

EFL teachers emphasized that sufficient rest was crucial for managing occupational anxiety (OA) and coping with the negative effects of the Double Reduction policy, although they reported a significant reduction in their rest time since the policy's implementation. Many participants also highlighted the importance of institutional support, particularly through effective academic management models. Collective lesson preparation was cited as a key example of such support. Participants B, C, and F noted that their schools had implemented group lesson planning, where subgroups of EFL teachers were assigned specific tasks, such as lesson preparation or homework design. This collaborative approach helped reduce individual workloads by sharing responsibilities, though teachers still prepared lessons independently, shouldering full responsibility for managing additional teaching content and homework demands.

The organization of after-school services also varied across schools, with some institutions mobilizing additional resources to lessen the frequency of EFL teachers' involvement, thereby mitigating the impact on their rest time and OA. Participant F praised her school’s flexible working hours policy, which allowed teachers to choose whether to stay late during non-essential office hours. This flexibility enabled more effective use of rest time and was viewed by participants as a valuable form of institutional support.

7. Discussion

This section examines the study's findings in depth, situating them within the context of existing literature to address the research questions:

RQ1: How do EFL teachers in a secondary school in Shenzhen perceive the impact of the Double Reduction policy on their occupational anxiety (OA) and well-being?

RQ2: How do they cope with occupational anxiety?

The findings reveal that the Double Reduction policy has had a profound impact on EFL teachers, significantly contributing to their OA through increased job demands and heightened turnover intentions. Teachers reported negative feelings, such as stress, tension, and anxiety, stemming from their expanded workloads and an erosion of professional identity. These experiences align with prior research that links policy-induced changes to teacher burnout and occupational stress (Liu & Wu, 2021; Asaloei et al., 2020). The necessity to adapt to new educational frameworks while managing additional responsibilities highlights the ripple effect of policy changes on teachers’ well-being and underscores the importance of robust institutional and individual support systems.

The policy has also fueled a growing intention among some teachers to leave the profession or transition to non-English teaching roles. This trend mirrors findings in broader research, which consistently links OA with attrition (Mearns & Cain, 2003; Blix et al., 1994). A stable workforce is essential for equitable access to high-quality English education, and addressing the root causes of turnover is imperative to prevent disruptions to the education system (Zeichner, 2009).

The study identifies three primary factors contributing to OA under the policy: increased workloads, heightened parental pressure, and intensified institutional demands. Participants reported that additional responsibilities, such as managing after-school services, redesigning homework, and accommodating more teaching content, extended their working hours and infringed on personal time. These findings are consistent with previous studies that link workload increases to greater OA (Blix et al., 1994; Yang et al., 2009).

Parental expectations compounded the problem, as teachers were frequently held accountable for students' performance despite the policy's intention to ease academic pressure. Parents often criticized new homework formats and continued to push for high SHSEE scores. Institutional pressures further exacerbated stress levels, with school leaders closely monitoring teachers' compliance with policy mandates while simultaneously demanding improved student outcomes. These findings align with earlier research emphasizing the dual stress of parental and administrative pressures on teachers (Forlin, 2001; Aloe et al., 2014).

EFL teachers in this study employed several coping strategies to manage the OA caused by the Double Reduction policy. Participants emphasized the importance of rest and relaxation, engaging in activities such as sleeping, traveling, and leisure pursuits to counterbalance their increased workloads. Teachers also sought support through collective lesson planning and flexible work arrangements, which helped alleviate individual burdens. These strategies are supported by stress-coping theories, which highlight the critical role of rest and a healthy work-life balance in managing occupational stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984; Wang, 2022).

However, while personal coping strategies provided temporary relief, the findings underscore the necessity of institutional support. Schools must take an active role in addressing workplace-induced stress by providing adequate resources, creating supportive environments, and offering professional development opportunities. Institutional backing is vital for reducing teacher anxiety and improving retention, as previous research has shown (İpek et al., 2018). Policymakers also need to prioritize a top-down approach to resource allocation and the development of robust support systems that enable teachers to navigate the demands of the policy effectively.

This chapter highlights the significant impact of the Double Reduction policy on EFL teachers' OA, driven by increased workloads, stress from parental and institutional pressures, and intentions to leave the profession. By integrating the findings with existing literature, the study emphasizes the urgent need for systemic interventions, such as institutional support and policy adjustments, to alleviate teacher anxiety, improve well-being, and sustain the EFL teaching workforce in China.

8. Conclusion

This study explores the occupational anxiety (OA) faced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Shenzhen secondary schools under China's Double Reduction policy, focusing on the coping strategies they employ. The findings reveal that the policy has significantly increased teachers' workloads by introducing additional responsibilities, while mounting pressures from parents and institutions further intensify their stress, often placing teachers in a difficult position between meeting policy mandates and addressing students' academic needs. Using Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study identifies the interconnected stressors operating at macro-, meso-, and micro-levels. To manage this anxiety, teachers rely on strategies such as prioritizing rest, engaging in relaxation activities, and benefiting from institutional support like collective lesson planning and flexible working arrangements. The research underscores the importance of a multi-pronged approach to addressing OA: teachers should adopt proactive self-care routines, schools need to foster supportive environments through mentorship and professional development opportunities, and policymakers must ensure sufficient resources and clear implementation guidelines to reduce teacher stress. While the study's small, gender-

homogeneous sample and qualitative design limit its generalizability, it highlights the need for future research that incorporates larger, more diverse samples and mixed-method approaches. Ultimately, this research emphasizes the critical need for comprehensive and sustainable support systems to safeguard teacher well-being and facilitate the effective implementation of educational reforms.

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