

To Teach or not to Teach? A Qualitative Study of Chinese University Teachers' Cognitions on Literature in Language Education

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Abstract—While Literature in Language Education (LLE) has gained renewed theoretical prominence, the cognitive processes driving its implementation in pragmatic, skills-oriented EFL contexts remain under-researched. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and Borg's teacher cognition framework, this qualitative case study investigates the cognitions of three university EFL teachers in China regarding the integration of literature. Data, derived from in-depth semi-structured interviews, were subjected to thematic analysis. The findings suggest that while teacher participants recognized the intrinsic value of literary texts, they varied in how they positioned literature in this course and in how consistently they enacted LLE. Their cognitions and practices were heavily mediated by a complex interplay of contextual affordances and constraints, including personal prior experiences, perceptions of student proficiency, and systemic pressures from institutional curricula and material conditions. The study highlights the pedagogical tension inherent in literature instruction within an examination-oriented culture, offering critical implications for teacher professional development, curriculum design, and the alignment of assessment with humanistic educational goals.

Index Terms—Chinese EFL teachers, literature in language education, Sociocultural Theory, teacher cognition

I. INTRODUCTION

The incorporation of literature into second/foreign language (L2/FL) curricula involves a long-standing pedagogical tradition (Hall, 2016; Kramsch & Kramsch, 2000; Maley, 2012; Paran, 2008). More recently, literature has shifted from being treated primarily as an object of aesthetic study to being used as a pedagogical resource for developing language proficiency, critical thinking, and intercultural awareness (Carroli, 2008; Rosenblatt, 2016; Naji et al., 2019). Thus, literary texts are repositioned as rich classroom resources that offer linguistic input, cultural insight, and aesthetic engagement (Bland, 2018). As a result, literature has gained renewed prominence in the actual language classroom (Tsang & Paran, 2025), leading to the development of instructional frameworks designed to bridge the gap between language learning and literary interpretation (Bloemert et al., 2019; Paran, 2008).

Despite the international consensus that literature should play an important role in L2/FL curricula, the implementation of literature-based instruction remains limited in most English language classrooms (Paran, 2008; Duncan & Paran, 2017, 2018). While literary-oriented approaches (e.g., critical literacy; cultural literacy) have gained popularity in some Western educational settings (e.g., Bobkina & Stefanova, 2016; Paesani & Allen, 2012), language-based and skills-oriented approaches continue to dominate in traditional English as a foreign language (EFL) settings, particularly in China (e.g., Cheung & Hennebry-Leung, 2020; Tsang et al., 2020; Sun, 2023). In recent years, China's Ministry of Education (CMOE) has issued policy documents that promote literary and cultural literacy within undergraduate English education, shifting it towards cultivating international perspectives and cultural competence (CMOE, 2018) and further requiring English-major training to strengthen liberal arts components through formal curriculum integration (CMOE, 2020). However, in Chinese higher education, utilitarian learning goals, assessment pressures, and tightly structured curricula often leave limited space for sustained literary engagement (Hall & Yang, 2018), and teachers commonly report low confidence and substantial constraints when attempting to incorporate literary components in classroom practice (Cheung, 2019; Sun, 2023; Tsang & Paran, 2025). These tensions make it important to examine the cognitive and contextual conditions that shape how teachers understand and implement literature in

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tertiary EFL settings.

Against this backdrop, the present qualitative study addresses the issue of underexplored teacher-cognition research on LLE in Chinese tertiary EFL settings by examining how EFL teachers' cognitions about LLE are formed and practiced. Drawing on semi-structured interviews with three in-service teachers, the study adopts a case study approach to explore how teachers perceive the value of literature and how their cognitions are shaped within a specific tertiary environment. Grounded in Borg's (2015) teacher cognition framework and informed by the Sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978), this study addresses two research questions: (a) What are EFL teachers' cognitions about implementing literature in language education? and (b) What factors mediate EFL teachers' cognitions?

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Literature in Language Education

While some refer to it as Literature in Education (LIE), the area is also known as Literature in Language Education (LLE), which is often viewed as a key means of fostering cultural awareness alongside language development (Carter, 2007; Hall, 2015; Lazar, 1993; Paran, 2008). Paesani's (2011) notion of "language-literature instruction", defined as "the deliberate integration of language development and literary study across the university curriculum" (p. 162), frames the two as mutually reinforcing in L2 settings. This integration is further justified by arguments that literature can enhance motivation and engagement, and that close, sustained reading supports higher-order thinking and deeper engagement with texts (Hall, 2016).

Drawing on Carter and Long's (1991) three models of teaching literature, the benefits are commonly discussed in relation to language development, cultural learning, and personal growth. Linguistically, literary texts provide authentic, context-rich language and complex discourse that can support vocabulary, grammar, and reading development (Bobkina & Romero, 2025; Calafato & Paran, 2019). Literary language may also stimulate more nuanced oral and written production, encouraging creative writing and critical engagement (Hall, 2017; Jones, 2019). Culturally, literature offers aesthetic and intercultural encounters with diverse perspectives and values, aligning with curricular emphases on intercultural communicative competence (Bland, 2013; Bobkina et al., 2021; Carroli, 2008). In addition, sustained engagement with literary worlds is often linked to whole-person education, supporting cognitive, affective, and moral development and enhancing motivation through emotional investment (Hall, 2015, 2016; Naji et al., 2019).

Recent empirical work has examined instructional models (e.g., Bloemert et al., 2016; Bloemert et al., 2019; Paran, 2008), literary text selection and teaching approach (e.g., Graham et al., 2024; Luukka, 2019; Mohaideen et al., 2020), and learners' experiences and perceived benefits (e.g., Tsang et al., 2020; Md Salleh & Ismail, 2022; Viana & Zyngier, 2020). When classroom studies are available, findings commonly point to potential gains in language-related outcomes and engagement (Bobkina et al., 2021; Calafato & Paran, 2019), while also indicating that students' engagement can depend on scaffolding and may be accompanied by uncertainty when pedagogies depart from familiar information-oriented norms (Nguyen, 2016). A large-scale survey by Duncan and Paran (2017, 2018) further suggests that students frequently value literature for instrumental language purposes, and that teachers' reported approaches and time allocation vary widely, with curricular conditions shaping practice in powerful ways. However, comparatively fewer studies have centered on teachers' cognitions and decision-making. Across diverse contexts, available evidence points to a recurring implementation gap in which teachers express positive attitudes toward literature yet report limited classroom practice, commonly attributing this to insufficient preparation or confidence and to systemic pressures such as assessment washback, time constraints, rigid curricular specifications and mandated textbooks (Calafato, 2018; Cheung & Hennebry-Leung, 2020; Saka, 2018; Sun, 2023; Zengin et al., 2019).

B. Teacher Cognition on Literature in Language Education

Teacher cognition is fundamentally defined as "the unobservable cognitive dimension of teaching - what teachers know, believe and think" (Borg, 2003, p. 81), a construct widely regarded as pivotal to understanding the rationale behind instructional decision-making. Early works, largely influenced by cognitive psychology (Barcelos, 2003), tended to treat teachers' mental lives as relatively stable and measurable through quantitative tools such as questionnaires (Borg, 2018). More recent scholarship challenges this view, arguing that cognition is personal and situated, emerging through teachers' ongoing engagement with practice rather than existing as a fixed set of traits (Burns et al., 2015; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). In response, sociocultural perspectives have become more prominent, conceptualizing cognition as dynamic, complex, and continuously reconstructed through teachers' interactions with social and contextual contexts (Johnson, 2018; Li, 2020). This shift has broadened empirical work from documenting what teachers think to examining how cognitions develop, what mediates them, and how they relate to classroom practice across instructional domains and educational settings (Borg, 2015; Gao & Zhang, 2020).

Empirical studies across contexts suggest that teachers generally admit the pedagogical value of literature and associate it with multiple learning gains, particularly in language development (e.g., Bobkina et al., 2021; Calafato & Paran, 2019; Sun, 2023), cultural awareness, and personal growth (e.g., Bobkina & Romero, 2025; Zengin et al., 2019). At the same time, evidence suggests that these positive orientations are often accompanied by an instrumental framing of literature, whereby literary texts are primarily justified as means to achieve utilitarian language objectives rather than as opportunities for sustained interpretation or aesthetic engagement (Férez Mora et al., 2020). Relatedly, teachers tend

to report greater confidence in literature's contribution to reading development and lexical growth than to oral communication, signaling an uneven perceived value across language skills (Bobkina & Romero, 2025; Duncan & Paran, 2017, 2018), and a recurrent tension between valuing LLE in principle and adopting pragmatic, constraint-sensitive enactments in practice (Cheung & Henneby-Leung, 2020; Sun, 2023; Tsang & Paran, 2025). What remains under-examined, however, is how teachers' cognitions and decision-making about LLE are constructed and mediated in situated institutional contexts, particularly in Chinese tertiary EFL settings. Addressing this gap, the present study investigates Chinese university EFL teachers' cognitions about LLE and explores how these cognitions are mediated by contextual constraints and reflected in teaching practice.

C. Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Sociocultural Theory (SCT) (Vygotsky, 1978) as an explanatory framework to understand how EFL teachers' cognitions are formed, mediated, and constrained. Central to SCT is the concept of mediation, which views human cognition as developing through participation in socially organized activities rather than residing solely within the individual (Wertsch, 1991; Johnson, 2006, 2009; Li, 2020). From this perspective, thinking is always mediated by culturally constructed tools and signs, such as language, texts, curricula, assessment systems, and institutional norms, that shape how individuals interpret and act upon their experiences (Lantolf & Thorne, 2006). Importantly, mediation can be explicit when a person (e.g., a teacher) intentionally brings in visible tools during an activity, such as guiding questions, paraphrasing, pointing, gestures, or visual materials, to direct learners' attention and help them solve the task, so their thinking and actions are guided step by step (Wertsch, 2007; Lantolf, 2006). In the present study, teachers' cognitions are not treated as fixed internal states but as dynamic processes shaped by ongoing engagement with textbooks, syllabi, assessment regimes, student profiles, and disciplinary traditions. In this sense, SCT complements Borg's (2015) teacher cognition framework by clarifying how contextual factors mediate the link between teachers' thinking and pedagogical decision-making. It also helps interpret tensions between teachers' stated beliefs and their reported instructional choices not as inconsistencies, but as outcomes of contextually mediated cognition that is continually reshaped with institutional and cultural environments (Li, 2017).

III. METHODOLOGY

The present study employed a qualitative case study design to explore Chinese university EFL teachers' cognitions about implementing LLE, as qualitative research helps explore teaching processes in real classroom settings (Creswell, 2007). A case study approach was selected as particularly appropriate given the study's focus on how and why questions concerning a contemporary educational phenomenon (Yin, 2018).

A. Context and Participants

This study was conducted in a public comprehensive university in mainland China. English education in such settings generally reflects national policy orientations while facing common structural constraints, including exam-oriented assessment regimes and limited curricular space for sustained literary engagement. The research site was selected as a "local knowledge case" (Thomas & Myers, 2015, p. 16), thereby enabling in-depth access to institutional practices and participants' perspectives.

As part of a larger qualitative project, eight university EFL teachers were initially recruited using purposive sampling (Patton, 2015) to ensure variation in (a) overall teaching experience and (b) prior exposure to literature-related training. Among these participants, three teachers (Irene, Lily, and Julia) were purposively selected for the present study as they all taught the same course type (a skill-oriented course named Comprehensive English), which enabled a more controlled, course-level comparison of how different teachers interpret and respond to shared curricular expectations. At the same time, these three cases retained meaningful variation in how they positioned literature within language teaching, making them analytically useful for examining differences in cognition under comparable instructional conditions. To protect participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned and identifying institutional details were removed. Table 1 provides an overview of teachers' basic information:

TABLE 1
TEACHER PARTICIPANTS' PROFILE

Teacher	Academic Qualification	Years of Teaching	Courses
Lily	BA (English Language Teacher Education), MA (English Language and Literature)	14	Comprehensive English (prominent); English Language Teaching Methodology
Julia	BA (English Language Teacher Education), MEd (English Language Teaching)	24	English Phonetics (prominent); Comprehensive English
Irene	BA (English), MA (English Language and Literature)	20	Comprehensive English (prominent); British Literature; Selected Reading in American Literature; English Rhetoric

B. Data Collection

Data were collected in March 2025 through semi-structured interviews, which are widely used in educational

research to facilitate in-depth exploration of participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations (Miles et al., 2014; Patton, 2015). In teacher cognition research, interviews are regarded as a particularly appropriate method for accessing teachers' beliefs, reasoning, and pedagogical decision-making, as these cognitive processes are not directly observable in classroom practice (Borg, 2015). Semi-structured interviews combine pre-prepared guiding questions with flexibility to probe emerging issues, allowing for systematic coverage of key topics while enabling participants to elaborate on context-specific experiences (Salmons, 2014).

The interview protocol consisted of three sections (see Appendix). This structure ensured alignment with the research questions while allowing participants to introduce salient issues. All interviews were conducted on a one-on-one basis, audio-recorded with participants' informed consent, and transcribed verbatim. Chinese was used as the interview language, as both the interviewer and participants were native speakers, allowing for more nuanced expression of beliefs and experiences. Each interview lasted approximately 90 minutes. Follow-up questions and probes were used to clarify responses and explore emerging themes in greater depth.

C. Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an iterative thematic analysis informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework and guided by a sociocultural perspective (Vygotsky, 1978) and Borg's (2015) teacher cognition model. All interview recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve participants' original meanings and minimize interpretive bias at the transcription stage. Transcripts were returned to participants for member checking, allowing for clarification and confirmation of accuracy.

The analysis began with repeated reading of the transcripts to achieve familiarization, during which initial analytic notes were recorded. Initial coding was conducted inductively at a semantic level, generating data-driven codes that stayed close to teachers' own wording (e.g., references to literature as "supporting language learning," feelings of "difficulty" or "confidence"). These initial codes were systematically reviewed and refined to ensure consistency and accuracy across participants. A codebook approach was subsequently adopted to organize related codes into subthemes and higher-order themes through constant comparison across cases. Analytic tables and thematic mapping were used to examine patterns and relationships within the dataset. Themes were identified at the semantic level and iteratively reviewed against coded extracts and the full dataset. During the review phase, some subthemes were refined or merged to enhance conceptual clarity. This iterative process resulted in a final codebook comprising three overarching themes: cognition conceptualization, cognition enactment, and cognition mediation, each with clearly defined subthemes and codes (Table 2). These themes directly addressed the research questions and provided an analytically coherent structure for reporting the findings.

TABLE 2
CODEBOOK

RQs	Codes	Categories	Themes
1) What are EFL teachers' cognitions on implementing literature in language education?	⑩ Strengthening English-major identity	⑩ Literature as professional knowledge	⑩ Cognition Conceptualization
	⑩ Demonstrating disciplinary expertise		
	⑩ Supporting language teaching goals	⑩ Literature as pedagogical resource	
	⑩ Enriching vocabulary		
	⑩ Developing reading comprehension strategies		
	⑩ Serving as input for writing		
	⑩ Transmitting cultural values and perspectives	⑩ Literature as cultural content	
	⑩ Encouraging Chinese-Western comparison		
	⑩ Delivering ideological education		
	⑩ Selecting familiar literary genres	⑩ Patterns of integration	⑩ Cognition Enactment
	⑩ Relying on personal preference		
	⑩ Fitting lesson goals		
	⑩ Providing background information	⑩ Instructional framing	
	⑩ Contextualizing literary text		
	⑩ Guiding interpretation	⑩ Curricular prioritization	
	⑩ Prioritizing language proficiency outcomes		
	⑩ Focusing on exam content		
2) What factors mediate teachers' cognitions?	⑩ Having limited pedagogical training	⑩ Personal experiential mediation	⑩ Cognition Mediation
	⑩ Receiving theory-oriented coursework		
	⑩ Developing low self-efficacy		
	⑩ Experiencing emotional anxiety		
	⑩ Considering students' language proficiency	⑩ Contextual mediation	
	⑩ Noticing low student interest		
	⑩ Experiencing assessment washback		
	⑩ Responding to institutional expectations		
	⑩ Working with outdated textbooks	⑩ Artefact mediation	
	⑩ Following fixed syllabi		
	⑩ Relying on prescribed materials		

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section reports the findings from semi-structured interviews with three Chinese university EFL teachers: Irene, Lily, and Julia. Adopting a qualitative case-study design, the analysis is informed by SCT (Vygotsky, 1978) and the teacher cognition framework (Borg, 2015). Accordingly, the section is organized into two RQ-focused subsections: the first outlines how teachers conceptualized the role of LLE and how these conceptualizations were reflected in their reported instructional choices; the second examines how teachers' cognitions and enactments were mediated through multiple interacting influences.

A. Teachers' Cognitions on Implementing LLE

(a). Cognitions on LLE

All three teachers agreed that literature was consistently regarded as important in language education; however, they differed in how they articulated why it matters and what literature learning should accomplish. In particular, they linked literature's value to English-major education while also recognizing that early-year courses provide limited exposure to sustained literary reading, making preparatory or selective forms of LLE salient in *Comprehensive English*.

For Irene, literature was closely tied to her professional identity as an English major teacher. She framed literature as a form of disciplinary expertise that distinguishes English majors from non-English majors. In her view, literature constitutes an essential component of subject-specific competence and contributes to students' professional literacy. As she explained:

The role of literature, I believe, is to cultivate a professional and disciplinary literacy that distinguishes English majors from other non-English majors. If you study English but lack knowledge of significant literary works from English-speaking countries, it feels like a gap in your expertise. (Irene, interview)

Lily expressed a similar view, although with a slightly different emphasis. She regarded literature as part of “what helps students understand English as a discipline and develop professional literacy as English majors”. The statements indicate that literature was not viewed as extra reading material but as content that carries disciplinary meaning and contributes to the formation of English majors. This aligns with teacher cognition research arguing that teachers’ understandings of subject matter shape what they regard as valued curricular knowledge in a programme (Borg, 2015; Ellis, 2006).

At the same time, teachers also connected literature to language teaching goals. Irene explicitly acknowledged that in *Comprehensive English*, literature often takes a supportive role and is introduced to serve course objectives, stating, “It’s important. To meet teaching objectives, we need to incorporate some literary elements”.

Julia made the language-learning orientation even more explicit. She evaluated LLE mainly by its instructional utility and the extent to which it can enhance language proficiency outcomes:

The focus should primarily be on language skills, with a focus on how to leverage literary works to enhance language proficiency. Their word choice and language expression, I believe, are significantly better than in their previous functional writing assignments. However, gains in listening and speaking appeared limited. (Julia, interview)

Julia’s narrative reflects an instrumental tendency noted in previous research, in which literature is frequently justified through utilitarian language objectives in skills-oriented institutional contexts (Cheung & Hennebry-Leung, 2020; Hall & Yang, 2018; Sun, 2023; Tsang & Paran, 2025).

Lily also treated literature as compatible with language learning, but she did not frame it only as a tool for skills improvement. Instead, she viewed literature as a planned component that runs alongside language learning and supports longer-term development. She emphasized a stable, intentional integration guided by a structured rationale:

This module has two key features. The first is that I have a systematic framework; my primary focus is on embedding literature to cultivate students’ literary literacy. The second is incorporating teaching practice to develop their professional competence. These are the two pillars. Since I exclusively teach *Comprehensive English* to teacher education students, my approach centers on these objectives. (Lily, interview)

Lily’s cognition, therefore, blended pedagogical and professional aims, as she believes that literature supports both literary literacy and future teacher competence. It helps explain why Lily sought to create entry points for literature even in non-literary units, treating early-stage skill-oriented courses as transitional preparation for later literature courses.

In addition to disciplinary and pedagogical values, the teachers also highlighted literature as culturally meaningful. Julia emphasized that literature provides access to historically situated values and perspectives, which support comprehension:

Because you’ll find that in that era, within that context, the author’s values and perspectives were different from ours today. This is a form of cultural transmission. Understanding that culture helps you grasp why someone made certain choices back then... If students lack this cultural context, they struggle to comprehend the work. (Julia, interview)

Lily echoed from a broad perspective by stressing that “literature and culture are inseparable”, implying that cultural knowledge is not optional but necessary for interpreting texts in meaningful ways. Irene also described using Chinese-Western comparison and ideological elements, indicating that she sometimes approached literature as a carrier of values and perspectives beyond language forms.

To sum up, although the three teachers differed in emphasis, they all positioned LLE as meaningful for language education and justified it through overlapping functions. This pattern is consistent with empirical evidence showing that teachers often value literature for both instrumental language purposes and broader cultural learning, while teachers’ orientations and classroom priorities vary substantially across contexts and course conditions (Bobkina et al., 2021; Duncan & Paran, 2017, 2018; Viana & Zyngier, 2020).

(b). *Cognitions on Implementing LLE*

Although all three teachers endorsed literature as meaningful for language education, their accounts of implementing LLE in *Comprehensive English* show that enactment was typically selective, bounded, and negotiated within a skills-oriented course. A shared feature across teachers was that LLE tended to enter lessons through available openings, especially when the textbook or unit theme already contained authors, genres, or identifiable literary elements. Yet teachers differed in how systematic and sustained that integration became.

Irene described her integration as frequent but fragmented, emphasizing that literature appeared in “almost every lesson” but remained “piecemeal” rather than continuous:

But in comprehensive English classes, it’s fragmented, though there is some integration in almost every lesson. Whenever the textbook mentions a writer, I’ll introduce that writer; whenever a text involves literary elements, I’ll discuss them. But overall, it’s very piecemeal. (Irene, interview)

Lily also acknowledged that early course textbooks include very few literary texts, but she reported a more deliberate and continuous approach. She actively created connections through concepts and terms embedded in non-literary units, treating these moments as planned “seeds” for later literature courses:

Although Books 1 and 2 have very few literary texts, I still incorporate them. For instance, there’s a term called ‘Romantic.’ Anyway, it’s about Romanticism. So, I naturally tied it into literature. When I mentioned

Wordsworth, I told them: remember this for future literature classes. Even if you only recall that there was a man named Wordsworth, that he was a romantic poet, and that his core belief was revering nature. For one year, I tried playing audio and video clips; it left a deep impression. (Lily, interview)

Julia's reported enactment was comparatively low-intensity and more contingent on course aims and materials. She explained that unit selection and mandatory coverage were often decided collectively in the course group to "deal with the final exam questions," which oriented the course toward "language proficiency training" rather than sustained literary exploration. Within this structure, Julia noted that most taught units contained "almost no literary works," and when literature-related units did appear (e.g., Shakespeare), she usually offered "simple introductions" rather than extended literary teaching. When she taught literary excerpts, she tended to rely on contextual scaffolding by explaining "the author's background" and "the historical context of the era," and she sometimes required students to read the original work (e.g., *The Pearl*) before analysis. At the same time, she reported that her literary background was "relatively weak," so she prepared more thoroughly, consulted colleagues, and avoided elaborating on unfamiliar literary points in depth to prevent feeling "less confident."

All three teachers' accounts suggest partial alignment between their positive cognitions about LLE and their reported enactment: all attempted to include literature in some form, but implementation was typically constrained in continuity and depth. A recurring misalignment was that literature was often valued as disciplinary, pedagogical, and cultural content, yet in *Comprehensive English*, it was enacted mainly through opportunities provided by unit themes and prescribed materials, resulting in fragmented or low-intensity integration. This pattern is consistent with research showing that the cognition-practice relationship is complex and dynamic, not simply linear (Burns et al., 2015; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015), and that teachers' stated beliefs do not always translate into classroom action due to contextual constraints (Borg, 2015). It also resonates with SCT perspectives that such enactment is also mediated by institutional routines and the materials through which teaching is organized, which can shape what teachers perceive as feasible at particular moments (Johnson, 2009; Li, 2020).

B. Factors Mediating Teacher Cognition

In Borg's (2015) model, teachers' cognitions are formed and re-formed through experiential histories, classroom practice, and contextual influences; SCT further explains how such cognition develops through culturally situated interaction and the mediational means available in activity (Johnson, 2006, 2009). Drawing on these lenses, the findings are organized into three interrelated forms: experiential, contextual, and artefact mediation (Johnson, 2009), to show how teachers' cognition and practice co-evolved within their local teaching context.

Experiential mediation captures how teachers' prior language learning histories, professional coursework, and accumulated teaching experiences shaped both their understandings of LLE and their confidence to enact it. This aligns with the "apprenticeship of observation" (Lortie, 1975), which emphasizes the lasting influence of learning histories on teachers' instructional perceptions (Cheung, 2019; Ngo, 2018).

Irene and Lily highlighted a strong literature background but a lack of pedagogical preparation for teaching literature:

During my studies, I didn't study teaching methods at all. I went to comprehensive universities, so they basically didn't teach you how to teach a subject as other normal universities do. They only taught us the theory and the subject knowledge, but not how to teach literature in the actual classroom. (Irene, interview)

Honestly, there wasn't much of that practical stuff; you still have to figure it out on your own. Concrete practical guidance remains scarce. You still need to adapt things to your own specific circumstances. For me, it's all about intuition, which is purely intuitive and developed gradually. (Lily, interview)

This perceived gap supports prior work showing that limited pedagogical preparation can constrain teachers' capacity to translate subject knowledge into classroom enactment (Golombek, 2015; Kubanyiova & Feryok, 2015). It also helps explain why Irene and Lily reported relying on self-exploration and accumulated teaching experience to develop strategies.

Julia foregrounded the affective dimension of experiential mediation, describing early helplessness, reliance on colleague support, and perceived weakness in literary background:

When I first started teaching the Pearl, I felt quite helpless... these points were unfamiliar to me; I didn't know how to expand on them... Then I'd usually ask my colleagues for help... But I do feel my literary background is weak, and I'm not entirely comfortable teaching literary texts. (Julia, interview)

Her narrative shows that experiential mediation also shapes teachers' emotions and self-evaluations. In this sense, the lack of method-focused preparation resulted in significant teacher tensions, such as low self-efficacy and emotional discomfort, which functioned as internal barriers to LLE enactment. It also aligns with evidence from the Chinese context that insufficient training in literature teaching may contribute to constrained or utilitarian conceptions of LLE and lower levels of integration in practice (Sun, 2023).

Contextual mediation refers to how teachers' cognitions were shaped by micro-level classroom realities and macro-level institutional culture (Salinas, 2017), consistent with research emphasizing that teacher cognition develops in interaction with the surrounding environment (Borg, 2015; Burns et al., 2015; Johnson, 2006, 2009). At the micro level, teachers' judgements about students' readiness and engagement shaped what they considered feasible. Irene repeatedly referred to students' limited literary background as a key obstacle, noting that "you simply have no starting point." Lily similarly highlighted student-related constraints (e.g., limited background; low interest), shaping her decisions to keep

texts and tasks accessible. Julia also noted students' limited prior exposure to full-length originals, narrowing the depth of feasible engagement. Similar patterns have been reported in previous studies, where student factors can discourage teachers from using literary texts or from conducting deeper literary discussion (Sidhu et al., 2010). At the macro level, assessment expectations and exam pressure strongly regulated priorities. Lily stated that "literature isn't heavily assessed" and that assessment "influences what we teach," while Julia noted that "there are almost no literary elements in final exams". This pattern aligns with research describing exam-oriented values in China as redirecting classroom priorities toward test preparation and assessable skills (Luo et al., 2019; Zhu & Shu, 2017; Mo, 2020). When literature is weakly represented in assessment systems, it is more likely to be positioned as supportive rather than central, encouraging utilitarian language-oriented classroom practice (Sun, 2023; Tsang & Paran, 2025). The results support Borg's (2015) argument that contextual influences exist both inside and outside the classroom, and many are beyond teachers' control.

Artefact mediation was particularly crucial. Textbooks, syllabi, and curricula functioned as powerful mediational tools that shaped instructional priorities. Teaching materials shape what teachers can realistically do and how complex the teaching process becomes (Calafato, 2018). Across cases, outdated textbooks and relatively fixed syllabi reduced flexibility and limited teachers' opportunities for sustained LLE. Irene described the prescribed textbook as outdated and lacking contemporary relevance, while Julia noted that it had remained largely unchanged for many years, requiring teachers to supplement it with newer language resources. These artefacts did not merely transmit curricular expectations but actively structured teachers' pedagogical reasoning, confirming SCT claims that material tools both enable and limit cognition (Li, 2020).

Overall, the findings extend SCT claims that thinking develops through mediated activity within cultural and institutional settings (Vygotsky, 1978; Lantolf & Thorne, 2006), while also aligning with teacher cognition research that places teachers' cognitions and decisions in interaction with prior experience, professional learning, and contextual constraints (Borg, 2015). The present cases further show that the cognition-practice relationship is often mediated by the conditions of teachers' work (Freeman, 2002). Recent teacher cognition research increasingly stresses the socially embedded nature of cognition and the importance of context in explaining teachers' instructional decisions (e.g., Cheung, 2019; Gao & Zhang, 2020; Ngo, 2018). Therefore, rather than interpreting limited LLE enactment as a simple mismatch between belief and practice, it may be more appropriate to understand it as an outcome of teachers' mediated decision-making within specific social and institutional environments.

V. CONCLUSION

This qualitative case study examined Chinese university EFL teachers' cognitions about implementing LLE within a skill-oriented course, from the perspectives of SCT and the teacher cognition framework. It found that teachers' understandings and enactments of LLE were mediated by their prior experiences and knowledge, as well as by social and institutional conditions, which often lead literature toward skills-oriented uses. Overall, the study adds context-sensitive evidence by clarifying how multi-level mediation shapes what teachers see as available when teaching literature in a constrained EFL course context.

The findings provide several implications for teachers and stakeholders who aim to strengthen LLE in tertiary EFL settings. First, in teacher education and professional development, it is important to go beyond treating literature as content-based knowledge and offer more practical support, such as modelling how to scaffold students' interpretation, how to design discussion tasks that still fit course aims, and how to evaluate literary learning. Second, at the departmental level, curriculum and assessment should be better aligned with LLE goals, because if literary competence is not clearly valued in assessment, literature is likely to remain marginal even when teachers recognize its importance. Third, at a curricular level, updating prescribed resources, allowing flexible supplementation, and creating space for teacher collaboration on text choice and task design may help support a more coherent link between language learning and meaning making through literary texts.

Several limitations should be noted. First, this is a small-scale qualitative case study with three teachers in one institutional setting, which supports depth rather than broad generalization. Second, the evidence base relies on interviews, which illuminate reasoning but cannot fully capture how LLE unfolds in actual classrooms or how students actually respond. Future research could therefore triangulate interviews with classroom observation, teaching artefacts, and student-focused data to trace how cognition, mediation, and enactment interact over time. Extending the design across multiple universities and course types or adopting a longitudinal lens on how teachers' LLE practices develop through professional learning and institutional change, would also strengthen understanding of how LLE can be supported under exam- and syllabus-driven contexts.

APPENDIX. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Section 1. Teachers' personal background information

1. Could you please introduce yourself briefly?
2. Could you please introduce the EFL course you are teaching briefly?

Section 2. Teachers' literature learning experience

3. Could you share your experience of learning literature in your school years and your teacher education courses? Did you receive any preparation for teaching literature?
4. How did your experience of learning literature affect your teaching practice in integrating literary works in the language classroom?

Section 3. Teachers' cognitions and practices about literature in language education

5. What, in your view, is the impact of teaching literary works in the language classroom?
6. What kinds of abilities or outcomes do you expect for your students?
7. What is your overall view of the relationship between literature and language learning in this course?
8. What challenges or tensions have you experienced when teaching literature?
9. How do you choose texts/authors/genres for this course?
10. What materials and resources do you currently use to support your literature teaching?
11. Could you walk me through a typical lesson on how you use literature?
12. What are the major factors that affect your practice of using literary works?
13. Is there anything that you would like to add?

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