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Understanding EFL Teachers' Occupational Anxiety under Double Reduction Policy

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Abstract: This paper explores the repercussions of China's Double Reduction policy on the occupational anxiety and overall well-being of secondary school EFL teachers in Shenzhen. Drawing insights from interviews with six participants, the study uncovers three core drivers behind the increased professional burden: the requirement to offer extended after-school services, revised expectations surrounding homework practices, and the integration of broader instructional content. These shifts have contributed to heightened psychological strain, ambiguous professional roles, and intensified pressure from both school administrators and students' families. While the initiative was designed to alleviate academic stress for students, it appears to have inadvertently transferred pressure onto educators, aggravating their anxiety levels and diminishing job satisfaction. The research further outlines the coping mechanisms adopted by teachers, including rest, personal relaxation techniques, and institutional supports such as cooperative lesson design and schedule flexibility. Nevertheless, the study argues that more fundamental changes—such as targeted training opportunities and explicit policy directives—are essential to genuinely mitigate teacher stress. The findings point to an urgent need for systemic support structures to uphold teacher morale and ensure the intended benefits of educational reform are realized.

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

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1. Introduction

China's National College Entrance Examination, commonly known as Gaokao, has long dominated the education landscape, promoting exam-focused approaches that have increased academic pressure on students, heightened anxiety among parents, and contributed to unethical practices in education. To counter these issues, the Double Reduction policy was launched in July 2021 with the goals of lessening homework loads, regulating the private tutoring industry, and shifting the focus of education from selective testing to nurturing talents. Although much of the existing research centers on the policy's effects on students, parents, and tutoring services, the consequences for teachers have received relatively little attention. Emerging studies indicate that the policy has resulted in longer working hours, heavier workloads, and heightened teaching expectations for educators, thereby increasing their stress and anxiety levels. Nevertheless, there remains a shortage of empirical work examining how these changes influence teachers' well-being and professional growth, signaling a pressing need for further study.

English, as a compulsory subject in Chinese junior high schools, is widely regarded as crucial for students' academic achievement and future opportunities. EFL teachers frequently encounter significant occupational anxiety due to the high expectations from parents, especially related to the Secondary School Entrance Examination (SHSEE), which heavily emphasizes English performance. Beyond common occupational pressures, EFL teachers face specific challenges such as cultural adaptation, language-related anxiety, and shifts in their social and professional standing. Despite these difficulties, there is limited research exploring the Double Reduction policy's impact on the occupational anxiety of EFL teachers, underscoring the importance of investigating how these policy shifts have affected their professional roles and well-being.

This study employs a qualitative methodology to investigate the occupational anxiety of EFL teachers in Shenzhen's secondary schools amid the Double Reduction policy and the coping strategies they adopt. The research addresses two primary questions:

RQ1: What are Shenzhen EFL teachers' perceptions of the Double Reduction policy's effects on their occupational anxiety and well-being?

RQ2: What coping mechanisms do they use to manage occupational anxiety?

Six teachers, recruited through snowball sampling, participated in semi-structured interviews to provide in-depth and nuanced perspectives on their experiences. The data were analyzed using Thematic Analysis as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006) to identify recurring themes and patterns. This research seeks to fill existing gaps by illuminating the lived experiences of EFL teachers under the policy and offering insights to better support their well-being.

2. Literature Review

This section delves into the notions of teacher professional well-being (PWB) and occupational anxiety (OA), focusing particularly on Chinese EFL teachers. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory is applied to understand the complex, multi-layered aspects of these constructs. Professional well-being for teachers includes physical, mental, and social health, reflecting their overall satisfaction in their career. Frameworks such as Seligman's (2011) PERMA model and Kern et al.'s (2014) five domains—emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievement—underscore the multifaceted nature of PWB. Negative experiences like stress and burnout are common within teaching professions and frequently lead to job dissatisfaction and turnover.

Occupational anxiety, a significant component of PWB, refers to the stress, worry, and tension that arise from conflicting job demands and pressures, which can result in detrimental psychological and physical effects. It represents persistent challenges that interfere with teachers' well-being and job performance, often presenting as chronic fatigue or emotional detachment. For Chinese EFL teachers, such anxieties are intensified by unique factors including parental expectations, cultural challenges, and language-related pressures, all compounded by educational reforms like the Double Reduction policy.

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model provides a structured lens for examining OA, dividing influencing factors into four interconnected layers. The macrosystem comprises societal values, technological progress, and reforms such as the Double Reduction policy, which elevate stress levels by increasing accountability and altering the educational context. The exosystem includes broader institutional frameworks like school governance and administrative policies, which have significant implications for teachers' workloads and access to resources. Adequate administrative support—characterized by transparent communication and provision of resources—can mitigate stress, whereas its absence tends to exacerbate anxiety. At the mesosystem level, interactions between teachers and their surrounding environment, including relationships with students, parents, and colleagues, play a crucial role. Positive interpersonal connections and peer support networks help reduce occupational anxiety, while conflicts elevate stress levels. Finally, the microsystem focuses on individual attributes such as resilience, coping mechanisms, and professional

identity; teachers with robust identities and effective coping skills are better equipped to manage work-related pressures.

The repercussions of OA on teachers are extensive, affecting their health, emotions, and job effectiveness. Research links occupational anxiety to burnout, emotional exhaustion, and increased teacher attrition. In the context of China, the Double Reduction policy has intensified OA by adding to teachers' responsibilities and expectations, requiring higher teaching quality within constrained classroom time. For EFL educators, this stress is compounded by the need to maintain language proficiency, navigate cross-cultural demands, and accommodate diverse learner needs.

Adopting effective coping strategies is vital for alleviating OA. Individual initiatives such as engaging in professional growth, managing time efficiently, and practicing self-care can bolster resilience and diminish stress. Conversely, maladaptive approaches like avoidance may worsen anxiety. External support from mentoring, administrative assistance, and workplace programs also plays an essential role in easing occupational anxiety. Supportive leadership and collaborative working environments provide stability, while social support from family, colleagues, and supervisors helps lessen anxiety and promotes well-being.

In conclusion, occupational anxiety among teachers emerges from a complex interaction of personal, institutional, and systemic factors. Effectively addressing this issue demands a holistic approach that combines strengthening individual resilience with comprehensive systemic support, enabling teachers to better manage the challenges posed by evolving educational environments.

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative methodology to deeply investigate teachers' lived experiences, which is vital for capturing the nuanced and context-dependent nature of the subject matter. The study seeks to answer two central questions:

RQ1: In what ways do secondary school English teachers in Shenzhen perceive the effects of the Double Reduction policy on their occupational anxiety and overall well-being?

RQ2: What strategies do these teachers use to manage their occupational anxiety?

The study is grounded in interpretivist and constructivist paradigms. Interpretivism highlights the subjective and socially constructed aspects of teachers' experiences, acknowledging that perceptions of occupational anxiety are influenced by individual contexts and social interactions. Complementing this, constructivism posits that each teacher's understanding of reality is uniquely shaped by personal and situational factors. Together, these philosophical stances enable a comprehensive exploration of the diverse and complex ways teachers experience and cope with occupational anxiety amid the Double Reduction reforms.

A qualitative approach was selected to obtain rich, in-depth data that reflect participants' personal interpretations. While alternative qualitative methods like phenomenology and ethnography were considered, they were deemed less suitable since the focus is on individual perceptions of occupational anxiety rather than on describing a phenomenon or cultural group. Semi-structured interviews were chosen as the primary data collection technique because of their adaptability and ability to elicit detailed, nuanced responses.

Participants were recruited through purposive sampling, targeting six EFL teachers currently teaching in Shenzhen secondary schools, each with over three years of experience. This criterion ensured that all participants had ample exposure to the Double Reduction policy and could offer informed perspectives. The selection aimed to capture a variety of viewpoints to provide a comprehensive understanding of how the policy influences occupational anxiety and coping behaviors.

In total, six EFL teachers from Shenzhen, all directly impacted by the policy changes, were interviewed. Detailed demographic and professional information about these participants is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant details.

ID	Name	Age Range	Teaching Experience	Grade	Admin Role
A	Ida	26–30	3–5 years	9	Party Committee Member
B	Joy	26–30	3–5 years	8	Lesson Preparation Leader
C	Elva	26–30	3–5 years	8	None
D	Sammi	26–30	5–10 years	9	None
E	Emma	26–30	3–5 years	8	None
G	Sunny	31–35	3–5 years	9	Lesson Preparation Leader

4. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were selected as the main method for data collection due to their adaptability and capacity to elicit rich, in-depth qualitative insights. This interview format is widely recognized in social science research for balancing predetermined questions with the flexibility to explore emergent topics during discussions.

This approach fits well with the goals of qualitative research, which prioritize understanding participants' lived experiences and narratives rather than broad generalizations. Semi-structured interviews provide the opportunity to thoroughly investigate teachers' perspectives, emotions, and experiences while maintaining a guiding structure for the conversation. As such, this method enabled the collection of detailed data on EFL teachers' views regarding occupational anxiety in the context of the Double Reduction policy.

Prior to formal data collection, two pilot interviews were conducted to identify and address any potential challenges and to refine the interview protocol. These pilots involved EFL teachers who met the study criteria but were not included in the main interview sample. Based on feedback from these preliminary interviews, the questions were adjusted to better capture richer information on occupational anxiety related to the policy.

The official interviews were conducted individually with six participants via Microsoft Teams, lasting approximately 40 to 60 minutes each. With participants' permission, all sessions were audio-recorded and later transcribed for subsequent analysis. A detailed timeline of the interview process is presented in Figure 1.

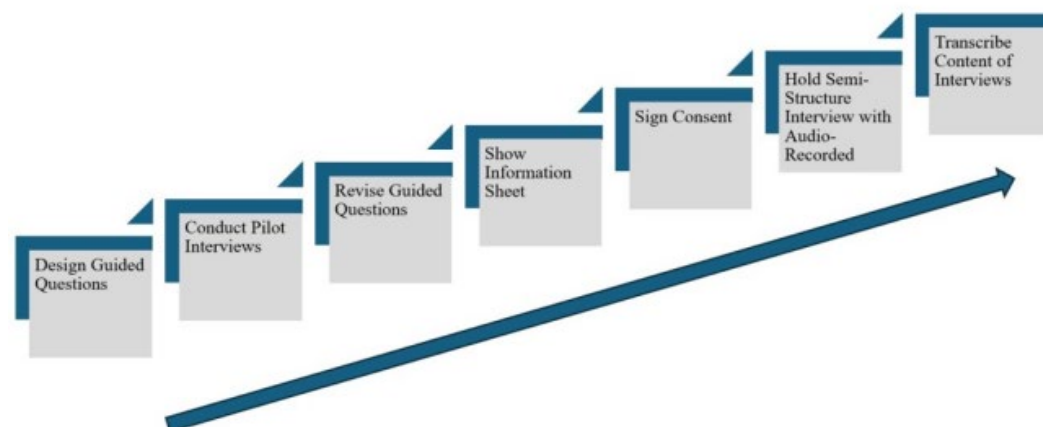


Figure 1. Timeline of Data Collection.

5. Data Analysis

The interview transcripts were examined using thematic analysis, following the procedure. This method was chosen because of its versatility, enabling application across different theoretical perspectives and research questions. Its adaptability made it particularly fitting for the aims of this study. Additionally, thematic analysis is user-friendly and relatively easy to learn, which benefits researchers during the analysis process.

The analysis involved six distinct stages, allowing the researcher to immerse herself in the data and systematically identify significant patterns. These patterns reflected teachers' views on the Double Reduction policy and how it influenced their occupational anxiety. The findings derived from this process were then used to inform the study's discussion. A detailed overview of the analytical steps is provided in Figure 2.

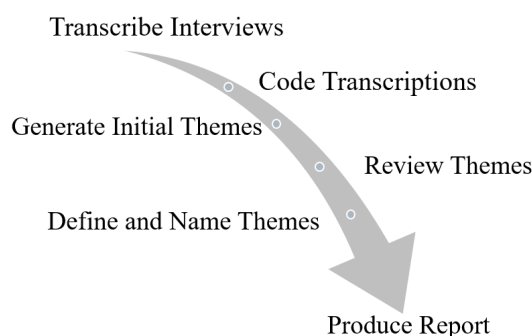


Figure 2. Process of Data Analysis.

This section explores how the Double Reduction policy has altered EFL teachers' professional duties, influenced their psychological well-being, and triggered occupational anxiety (OA), along with the coping approaches they have adopted. Insights were gathered from six secondary school EFL teachers, all of whom described substantial transformations in their daily responsibilities following the policy's enforcement. A common theme among all participants was the marked escalation in workload, particularly in three areas: newly assigned tasks, adjustments in homework planning, and the broadening of instructional content.

A major shift noted by the participants was the introduction of after-school service obligations. Although daily supervision was not universally required, five out of the six teachers (with the exception of Participant B) emphasized that this responsibility disrupted their regular routines. These changes led to longer working hours and significantly

affected both their professional performance and personal time. Teachers expressed difficulty in managing the growing demands of teaching alongside these added duties. Table 2 summarizes the participants' responses, illustrating how the management of after-school services contributed to their increased workload and scheduling conflicts.

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>

Due to variations in school-level policies and administrative practices, the frequency with which teachers were assigned after-school service duties differed. For instance, Participants A, D, and E indicated they were scheduled for these responsibilities approximately once every two to three weeks, whereas Participants C and F reported a weekly commitment.

Although the assignment frequency varied, all five teachers acknowledged that these duties contributed to a noticeable increase in their overall workload. Originally designed to alleviate students' academic stress outside regular school hours, the after-school programs inadvertently shifted additional pressure onto teachers. Despite receiving financial compensation for these extra hours, the increased responsibilities were still perceived as burdensome.

The emotional toll of these added duties was evident in the language used by Participants A, C, and D during interviews. They described the experience using words such as "frustrating," "bothersome," and "irritating," reflecting a clear manifestation of occupational anxiety brought on by the policy changes.

6.2. Changes in Homework Design

Another area where the increased workload of EFL teachers became evident was in the redesign of homework tasks. Participants indicated that the Double Reduction policy required them to significantly adjust their homework strategies. These adjustments included not only decreasing the volume of assigned work but also incorporating a wider variety of formats and tailoring assignments to meet different student needs.

As a result, teachers were compelled to invest additional time and effort into planning more creative and differentiated homework that aligned with policy expectations. A summary of the specific modifications described by participants is presented in Table 3.

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 *"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."*
- 5 *"EFL teachers have now reduced the amount of written homework and increased activities such as vlog recording, storytelling competitions, speech contests and drama performances."*

In order to align with the Double Reduction policy, EFL teachers were required to revamp their existing homework practices, as traditional methods were deemed no longer appropriate. According to the participants, designing assignments that could enhance students' English skills within more limited timeframes added significant pressure and workload. Although these adjustments were generally seen as beneficial for students, all six teachers emphasized that the process increased their stress levels and provided little to no benefit from the teachers' perspective.

Several teachers, including Participants B, C, F, and E, expressed that the rapid pace of required changes left them feeling "anxious" and "uneasy." In an effort to meet diverse learning needs, three teachers implemented tiered homework systems, grouping students by proficiency level and tailoring tasks accordingly. This approach, while pedagogically sound, created additional challenges in terms of assigning, collecting, and evaluating work, further extending their daily responsibilities. Participant C even described the entire process as "burdensome."

The policy's stipulation that homework must be completed within shorter time limits also compelled teachers to explore alternative assignment formats to improve learning efficiency. This led to a broader scope of work, with teachers now responsible for designing, executing, monitoring, and assessing new types of activities. For instance, Participant F shared her experience organizing English drama performances, which required selecting scripts, coaching students, coordinating rehearsals, ensuring safety, and managing practical elements such as venue setup and costumes. These expanded duties significantly increased time commitments and stress levels, exacerbating occupational anxiety. A detailed overview of these changes and the associated challenges is provided in Table 4.

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 implementation of the Double Reduction policy has also led to an increased workload for some EFL teachers by requiring them to introduce new instructional content into the curricula for seventh and eighth grades. Participants A, E, and F indicated that they now needed to cover material that was previously not included at these educational stages. This adjustment was largely driven by the policy's shift from exam-centric assessments to more process-based evaluation methods, which, while promoting holistic learning, have inadvertently weakened students' mastery of core English skills at the junior high level.

Teachers pointed out that Grades 5 and 6 play a critical transitional role in helping students acquire fundamental grammar, sentence structure, and reading comprehension skills. However, with changes in assessment priorities during these years, many students entered junior high lacking the necessary linguistic foundation. Consequently, EFL teachers were compelled to backtrack and reintroduce primary school-level content into their junior high teaching plans in order to close these learning gaps and ensure students met grade-level expectations.

Participants expressed concern that this problem was not unique to the current cohort, but would likely continue with incoming seventh-grade students in the years ahead. Table 5 provides an overview of the instructional adjustments made by teachers in response to these challenges. These efforts have substantially increased teaching demands, added pressure, and introduced additional layers of complexity to their daily responsibilities.

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>

In summary, the six EFL teachers interviewed identified increased workload as a central consequence of the Double Reduction policy. Although each teacher operated within a different educational context and faced distinct circumstances, three recurring themes—expanded responsibilities, changes in homework design, and newly required teaching content—consistently emerged across interviews.

Overall, the added workload has adversely affected the participants. Throughout the interviews, teachers frequently described their experiences using phrases such as "anxious," "under intense pressure," and "overwhelmed." These emotional responses correspond closely with the concept of occupational anxiety (OA) as defined in this study, indicating that the policy has negatively influenced teachers' professional well-being, particularly in terms of psychological health.

6.4. Pressure from Parents and Educational Institutions

In addition to the difficulties stemming from changes in teaching responsibilities, EFL teachers also encountered challenges in their interactions with parents, particularly in the form of insufficient understanding, limited support, and increased demands.

As discussed earlier, teachers had to adopt new formats for assigning homework to comply with the Double Reduction policy while maintaining instructional effectiveness.

However, these adjustments were not always well received by parents. Several participants shared experiences in which parents questioned the appropriateness of the revised homework practices and were unwilling to collaborate with teachers (see 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>

Teachers frequently find themselves having to explain and justify the rationale behind newly implemented homework strategies to parents, adding another layer of pressure to their already demanding roles. Many participants expressed a strong desire for greater parental support and acknowledgment of their contributions to students' English language development. The Double Reduction policy has thus intensified teacher workload, not only through instructional changes but also by amplifying the burden of parental engagement.

Parents' ongoing concerns about academic outcomes, especially in relation to the SHSEE, compound this stress. Although the policy is intended to alleviate student academic pressure, many parents remain focused on examination performance, creating a tension for teachers who must navigate the gap between policy directives and parental expectations. Participants described this contradiction as a source of confusion and emotional strain, indicative of role conflict and uncertainty, which significantly contributes to occupational anxiety (OA).

Institutional factors were also identified as major stressors. All interviewees pointed to the pressure exerted by school administrators, including the requirement to submit daily homework logs and the occurrence of unannounced checks to monitor policy implementation. Participant A remarked that such administrative scrutiny was a primary driver of her occupational stress.

Even as schools promote workload reduction for students, they simultaneously demand strong performance in high-stakes exams like the SHSEE. This duality forces teachers to design assignments that both conform to the reduced workload framework and support academic excellence. Participant D noted the difficulty of reconciling these conflicting expectations, which led to a heightened sense of professional tension. Collectively, the combined pressure from schools and parents contributes to role ambiguity and undermines teachers' psychological well-being.

6.5. Consequences of EFL Teachers' Occupational Anxiety

Insights from the interviews revealed that occupational anxiety (OA) not only affected the emotional well-being of all six EFL teachers but also influenced their career trajectories. As outlined in Section 4.2, teachers perceived many of the policy-driven adjustments as "extra burdens," which elicited feelings of anxiety, unease, inner conflict, and frustration.

These emotional responses extended to participants' perspectives on job satisfaction. Although no direct questions regarding job satisfaction were posed during the interviews, all six interviewees independently expressed intentions to leave their current roles. Three participants reported considering exiting the teaching profession entirely, while the remaining three contemplated transitioning to other subjects or different grade levels. This

suggests that OA, triggered by the Double Reduction policy, has had a tangible effect on teachers' long-term professional commitments. An overview of these intentions is presented 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>

Since the implementation of the Double Reduction policy, all six participants reported experiencing some level of inclination to pursue a job change, though the strength of this intention varied among them. Notably, four participants directly linked their motivation to leave their current positions with the policy-driven reforms and their resulting impacts.

6.6. Coping Strategies for Occupational Anxiety

When asked about their methods for managing occupational anxiety arising from the Double Reduction policy, all six EFL teachers described a variety of coping strategies. The most frequently mentioned approach was ensuring sufficient rest to counterbalance the heavy demands and stress of their roles. Participants emphasized the importance of recovering through adequate relaxation both after work and during weekends. Table 8 details the specific activities they engaged in during these 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 stressed that adequate rest plays a vital role in managing occupational anxiety (OA) and alleviating the negative consequences brought by the Double Reduction policy. However, they also reported a noticeable decline in their available rest time since the policy took effect. Additionally, many participants highlighted the significance of institutional support, especially through well-organized academic management systems. One such example is collective lesson preparation, where teachers collaborate to share tasks. Participants B, C, and F mentioned that their schools had adopted group lesson

planning, dividing responsibilities like lesson design and homework creation among sub-groups. While this approach helped distribute the workload, individual teachers still bore full responsibility for their own lessons and the increased demands of teaching content and assignments.

Regarding after-school service duties, the organization differed among schools. Some institutions allocated extra resources to reduce how often EFL teachers needed to participate, thereby lessening the strain on their rest time and occupational well-being. Participant F specifically praised her school's policy of flexible working hours, which allowed teachers to decide whether to stay late during non-mandatory office periods. This flexibility was seen as an important form of support that helped teachers better manage their rest and reduce stress.

7. Discussion

This section offers an in-depth analysis of the findings in relation to existing literature, addressing the two main research questions:

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

RQ2: What strategies do they employ to manage occupational anxiety?

The results demonstrate that the Double Reduction policy has substantially affected EFL teachers by increasing job demands and intensifying turnover intentions, thereby escalating occupational anxiety. Teachers expressed feelings of stress, tension, and frustration, which stemmed from greater workloads and a diminishing sense of professional identity. These outcomes are consistent with prior studies linking policy-driven reforms to increased teacher burnout and occupational stress (Liu & Wu, 2021; Asaloei et al., 2020). The necessity to adapt to new educational frameworks while taking on additional responsibilities illustrates the broader consequences of policy changes on teacher well-being and highlights the critical need for both institutional and personal support mechanisms.

Moreover, the policy has contributed to a growing trend among teachers contemplating leaving the profession or transferring to non-English subjects. This aligns with established research that associates occupational anxiety with teacher attrition. Ensuring a stable teaching workforce is vital for maintaining equitable access to quality English education, emphasizing the urgency of addressing factors that drive turnover.

The study identifies three core contributors to occupational anxiety under the policy: increased workload, heightened parental pressure, and intensified demands from school administration. Teachers reported that new duties—such as overseeing after-school programs, redesigning homework assignments, and incorporating additional teaching material—extended working hours and encroached on personal time. These findings corroborate earlier research linking workload escalation to higher occupational anxiety.

Parental expectations further exacerbated the situation, as educators were often held accountable for student performance despite the policy's goal of reducing academic pressure. Parents frequently challenged revised homework formats and remained fixated on achieving high SHSEE scores. Institutional pressures added to teachers' stress, with school leaders enforcing compliance with policy regulations while simultaneously demanding improved academic results. These dual sources of stress reflect previous studies highlighting the combined impact of parental and administrative pressure on teachers.

Teachers adopted several coping mechanisms to manage the occupational anxiety induced by the policy. Rest and relaxation were commonly emphasized, with activities such as sleeping, traveling, and leisure pursuits helping to offset increased workloads. Collective lesson planning and flexible working arrangements were also noted as valuable institutional supports that alleviated individual burden. These strategies align with stress-coping frameworks that stress the importance of rest and work-life balance in mitigating occupational stress.

Nonetheless, while personal coping strategies offered some relief, the study underscores the critical role of institutional support. Schools should actively address workplace stress by providing sufficient resources, fostering supportive environments, and offering professional development opportunities. Such institutional backing is essential for reducing teacher anxiety and enhancing retention, as supported by prior research. Policymakers must therefore prioritize top-down resource allocation and develop comprehensive support systems to help teachers effectively manage the demands imposed by the policy.

8. Conclusion

This research investigates the occupational anxiety experienced by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers working in Shenzhen secondary schools within the context of China's Double Reduction policy, with a particular focus on their coping mechanisms. Results indicate that the policy has considerably increased teachers' workloads through added duties, while pressures from both parents and educational institutions have compounded their stress levels, often forcing teachers to navigate conflicting demands between policy compliance and student academic support. Employing Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, the study uncovers interconnected sources of stress at the macro, meso, and micro levels. To alleviate anxiety, teachers reported relying on strategies including ensuring adequate rest, participating in leisure activities, and receiving institutional assistance such as collaborative lesson planning and flexible schedules. The findings highlight the necessity for a holistic approach to managing occupational anxiety, involving individual self-care, school-level support through mentoring and professional development, and policy-level efforts to provide adequate resources and clear directives. Although limited by a small, gender-uniform sample and a qualitative methodology, the study calls for future investigations employing larger and more diverse populations combined with mixed methods. Ultimately, the research stresses the urgent need for comprehensive support frameworks to protect teacher well-being and promote the successful enactment of educational reforms.

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