



Research Article

Self-Efficacy of EFL Pre-Service Teachers in China: A Mixed Methods Approach

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Received: 11 February 2025; **Revised:** 30 March 2025; **Accepted:** 15 April 2025

Abstract: Language teacher self-efficacy has been widely researched in the past decades. However, less attention has been paid to the pre-service teachers' self-efficacy during their teaching practicum. In order to fill this gap, the current research used a mixed-methods approach to investigate self-efficacy of English as a foreign language (EFL) pre-service teachers in China and explored the contributing factors to their self-efficacy. Specifically, the EFL Pre-service Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale was distributed to a sample of 59 student teachers. Two participants from the survey sample participated in semi-structured interviews. The results indicated that self-efficacy in EFL pre-service teachers was high, and no significant differences in self-efficacy were observed across different grades. The contributing factors to EFL pre-service teachers' self-efficacy were diverse, including introspection and emotional transfer, internship experience and teaching practice, feedback and encouragement, observing the success of others, success stories and overcoming challenges, emotional and physical states, and professional knowledge and skills. According to the results, some implications for improving the self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers were provided.

Keywords: self-efficacy, EFL pre-service teacher, levels, grade differences, contributing factors

1. Introduction

Since self-efficacy was introduced (Bandura, 1978), it has become an important research issue in the field of educational psychology, which aims to improve students' academic achievement by enhancing their self-efficacy. Later, however, the emphasis shifted from student self-efficacy to the topic of teacher self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986), concerning teachers' confidence in their capacity to influence student performance (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007), since lots of research proved that teacher self-efficacy is directly linked to the teaching effectiveness and student's learning outcomes (Burić et al., 2024; Lu et al., 2023; Wang, 2022). With the development of teacher self-efficacy research, numerous studies investigated the factors that may influence teacher self-efficacy. Marschall (2022) illustrated the complicated roles teacher identity played in the process of teacher self-efficacy development and how teacher identity strengthened self-efficacy. Pressley and Rangel (2023) investigated teacher self-efficacy in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and found that emotional exhaustion, past teaching achievements and administrative assistance exerted strong influences on the development of teacher efficacy. Multicultural education teachers received during initial teacher education and professional development proved to positively correlate with their levels of multicultural self-efficacy in a cross-national examination (Mou et al., 2025). However, all of these studies focused on the general teacher group.

As the study of teacher self-efficacy deepened, more researchers began to concentrate on EFL teachers (e.g., Choi & Lee, 2018; Kavanoz et al., 2015; Liu et al., 2024; Liu et al., 2021; Thompson & Woodman, 2019). However, scant attention was given to the group of EFL pre-service teachers (Hoang & Wyatt, 2021; Sivaci & Altaş, 2023). In the small number of related investigations, researchers preliminarily concentrated on the factors impacting EFL pre-service teachers, results showing that cultural and contextual elements impacted the self-efficacy beliefs and L2 proficiency of pre-service EFL teachers (Hoang & Wyatt, 2021) and both critical thinking tendencies and democratic norms are the key determinants of multicultural self-efficacy (Sivaci & Altaş, 2023). However, in the new era of language teaching across the globe, the self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers in terms of its profiles and grade levels is still unclear, and its contributing factors crave further exploration. To fill this gap, the current study recruited 59 EFL pre-service teachers to address the listed questions.

RQ1: What are the levels of self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers in China?

RQ2: Do grade levels differentiate the self-efficacy levels of Chinese EFL pre-service teachers?

RQ3: What factors contribute to the self-efficacy of Chinese EFL pre-service teachers?

2. Literature review

2.1 Defining language teacher self-efficacy

Self-efficacy, initially proposed by Bandura in 1977, refers to an individual's belief in their ability to successfully handle tasks and achieve desired outcomes (Bandura, 1986; 1977). According to Bandura (1997), four main sources influence the development of self-efficacy. The first source is mastery experience, which involves an individual's direct experiences of success or failure in specific situations. Similarly, Thompson et al. (2022) highlighted that positive perceptions of past achievements significantly enhance self-efficacy in the context of English medium instruction. The second source is vicarious experience, which entails observing and emulating the successes of others. Lishinski and Yadav (2021) indicated that observing successful peers and engaging in self-evaluation practices can significantly boost students' self-efficacy. The third influencing factor is verbal persuasion, which involves feedback from others. Recently, Qi et al. (2024) revealed that positive feedback that aligns with an individual's abilities can significantly enhance their sense of efficacy. This suggests that constructive and supportive feedback plays a crucial role in shaping self-efficacy beliefs, even though its impact may be relatively weaker than direct experiences. The fourth factor is emotional and physical states, which can notably impact self-efficacy. A study by Zheng et al. (2022) found that high levels of stress or negative emotions can undermine self-efficacy, while effective emotion regulation strategies can help mitigate these negative impacts.

In the educational field, teacher self-efficacy represents a teacher's confidence in their capacity to influence student performance and attain educational objectives (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007). Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001) conceptualized it as a multifaceted construct made up of three main components: efficacy in using effective instructional methods, managing the classroom, and actively engaging students in learning. A substantial body of research has consistently demonstrated that teacher self-efficacy is a vital determinant of teaching effectiveness and student outcomes (Aloe et al., 2014; Burić & Kim, 2020; Burić & Moè, 2020; Klassen & Tze, 2014; Mu et al., 2024; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2010; Zee & Koomen, 2016). Teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to experiment with innovative teaching strategies, persevere through challenges, and foster a more positive learning environment for students (Zee & Koomen, 2016). This positive influence extends to their job performance and the overall quality of their teaching (Klassen & Tze, 2014). Moreover, teacher self-efficacy has been shown to have a significant impact on job burnout. Studies by Aloe et al. (2014) and Skaalvik & Skaalvik (2010) revealed that teachers with stronger self-efficacy tend to experience lower levels of burnout. This suggests that self-efficacy can serve as a protective factor against the negative effects of job-related stress. Recent research has further highlighted the multifaceted role of teacher self-efficacy. For instance, Burić and Kim (2020) emphasized its importance in enhancing instructional quality, while Burić and Moè (2020) identified self-efficacy as a key driver of teacher enthusiasm. Additionally, Mu et al. (2024) found a statistically significant, positive, and moderate correlation between teacher self-efficacy and teacher resilience. These findings collectively underscore the critical importance of teacher self-efficacy in shaping various aspects of teaching and learning.

In the realm of EFL education, language teacher self-efficacy has emerged as a pivotal construct with far-reaching

implications for self-regulation, resilience against occupational stress, and job performance (Azari Noughabi & Amirian, 2021; Bing et al., 2022; Ding & He, 2022; Fathi et al., 2021; Granziera & Perera, 2019; Soodmand Afshar & Moradifar, 2021). At the core of this construct is its relationship with self-regulatory mechanisms. Azari Noughabi and Amirian (2021) highlight that EFL teachers with strong self-efficacy beliefs possess enhanced abilities to monitor and adapt their instructional strategies, a critical competency for ongoing professional development. This self-regulatory capacity extends beyond instructional planning to emotional management. Fathi et al. (2021) found that teachers with higher self-efficacy employ more effective emotion regulation strategies when navigating classroom challenges, suggesting that self-efficacy plays a key role in managing the emotional demands of teaching. The protective function of self-efficacy against occupational stress is another important aspect. Bing et al. (2022) identified a significant inverse relationship between EFL teachers' self-efficacy levels and their experiences of job burnout, particularly in high-stress language-teaching environments. This buffering effect is further nuanced by Ding and He (2022), who reported that Chinese EFL teachers with strong self-efficacy demonstrate greater academic buoyancy—the capacity to maintain motivational stability amid pedagogical setbacks. Collectively, these studies position self-efficacy as a dynamic mediator that not only mitigates burnout but actively fosters psychological resilience. Moreover, the operational impacts of self-efficacy on job performance are equally significant. Soodmand Afshar and Moradifar (2021) demonstrated that EFL teachers' confidence in their instructional capabilities directly correlates with enhanced classroom performance, suggesting that self-efficacy functions not merely as a psychological trait but also as an active driver of teaching effectiveness.

2.2 Self-efficacy levels of EFL pre-service teachers

In the domain of general education, several studies have investigated the levels of teacher self-efficacy (e.g., Alhumaid, 2021; Chow, 2024; Dahl-Leonard et al., 2023; Kuyini et al., 2018; Yang et al., 2023). They have found that teachers had moderate levels of self-efficacy. For instance, Kuyini et al. (2018) explored teacher self-efficacy, sentiments, and worries about carrying out inclusive education in Ghana. The results showed that teachers in this survey worried about inclusive education, were less positive, and had moderate levels of self-efficacy about putting it into practice.

Concerning the overall self-efficacy level of EFL teachers, a great deal of research indicated that it was relatively high (Fuchs et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2021; Utami & Kuswandono, 2023). Fuchs et al. (2021) explored the connection between EFL literacy teaching and teachers' self-efficacy, experience, as well as their first language, finding that EFL teachers had a strong sense of self-efficacy in teaching reading and writing. In the Chinese context, Liu et al. (2021) examined EFL teachers' self-efficacy in livestream teaching, with the results indicating that EFL teachers had moderate-to-high self-efficacy generally, and their levels of technological self-efficacy were higher than instructional self-efficacy. Utami and Kuswandono (2023) investigated Indonesian EFL teachers' self-efficacy in their professional practice and proved that they had high self-efficacy in their capacity to construct new learning materials.

Moreover, the existing literature has indicated that the overall level of EFL pre-service teachers' self-efficacy is moderate (Çankaya, 2018; Nugroho, 2017; Safitri, 2021). However, they have different results for the dimensional levels of self-efficacy. Safitri (2021) found that pre-service teachers had the highest level of self-efficacy in Using Teaching Strategies and the lowest level of self-efficacy in Classroom Management among the three aspects. While the results of the survey by Nugroho (2017) were the opposite. In addition, Çankaya (2018) found that pre-service teachers felt most efficacious about Using Teaching Strategies and least efficacious about Student Engagement, which led us to examine the levels of teacher self-efficacy in the current study.

2.3 Grade differences in self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers

Self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers has garnered significant attention in recent years. However, a significant gap exists in research on how self-efficacy differs among pre-service teachers across various academic grades or stages of their training programs. (e.g., Hoang & Wyatt, 2021; Mok et al., 2023; Seung et al., 2019). Here, “grades” refers to the academic year or level within the pre-service teacher education program (e.g., first-year vs. fourth-year students), while “training stages” refers to the progression from initial coursework to advanced practical experiences, such as practicum placements.

Limited research indicates that pre-service teachers who gain more practical teaching experience tend to have

stronger self-efficacy (Hoang & Wyatt, 2021; Mok et al., 2023). Hoang and Wyatt (2021) found that Vietnamese EFL pre-service teachers in later stages of their training, with more practicum experience, reported higher self-efficacy than those in earlier stages. Studies have also focused on the importance of mentorship from experienced teachers throughout practical teaching experiences. For example, Mok et al. (2023) highlighted that feedback on lesson plans can greatly boost pre-service teachers' self-efficacy.

However, not all studies report a consistent increase in self-efficacy with more training. Some research indicates that self-efficacy may decrease during the transition from university-based coursework to school-based practicum (Ma & Cavanagh, 2018; Pendergast et al., 2011). Pendergast et al. (2011) observed that pre-service teachers' self-efficacy was generally higher before they began their practicum compared to after, suggesting that the challenges and realities of classroom teaching can initially undermine their confidence. Similarly, Ma and Cavanagh (2018) found that pre-service teachers often experience a decline in self-efficacy before their initial practicum, likely due to anxiety and uncertainty about their teaching abilities.

2.4 Contributing factors to self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers

2.4.1 Mastery experiences

Bandura (1997) identified mastery experiences, which involved direct successes in completing tasks, as the most powerful source of self-efficacy. For teachers, this often translates to teaching experience (Hußner et al., 2023; Luo & Li, 2024). Hußner et al. (2023) demonstrated that accumulated micro-teaching experiences in teacher education programs, combined with systematic reflection, enhance pre-service teachers' self-efficacy. However, Luo and Li (2024) revealed complexities in this relationship, discovering that more experience was negatively associated with lesson delivery competence for EFL teachers due to mismatches with microteaching training requirements. Cognitive mastery, or deep understanding of the subject matter, also plays a significant role in enhancing the self-efficacy of EFL teachers. A recent study by Zhang and Fang (2022) revealed that EFL teachers with stronger technological pedagogical content knowledge reported higher levels of self-efficacy in a technology-integrated flipped classroom setting, highlighting that confidence in EFL teaching stems not only from practical experience but also from a deep cognitive understanding of the subject matter.

2.4.2 Vicarious experiences and social persuasion

Bandura's second source of self-efficacy, vicarious experiences or learning through observation (Bandura, 1997), intersects significantly with cultural contexts. For example, a study by Moradkhani and Haghi (2017) compared Iranian public school teachers with those in private institutes, finding that the latter group exhibited higher self-efficacy. This difference was attributed to the collaborative environments in private institutes, where teachers could observe their peers employing innovative teaching methods. Such modeling experiences fostered confidence and enhanced self-efficacy among the teachers. Braksiek (2022) also demonstrated that pre-service physical education teachers' self-efficacy significantly improved through intensive contact with people with disabilities. Although the context differs from EFL classroom teaching, this finding underscores the universal value of exposure to diverse educational scenarios in building pre-service teachers' confidence. Similarly, social persuasion, which involves encouragement from others, has been identified as a strong predictor of self-efficacy. Phan and Locke (2015) highlighted that Vietnamese EFL teachers placed a high value on feedback from mentors and students, often prioritizing it over personal achievements. This preference reflects the cultural values of collectivism and external validation, which emphasize the importance of group harmony and social approval in shaping self-perception and confidence.

2.4.3 Emotional and physiological states

Aligning with Bandura's proposition that emotional and physiological states significantly influence self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997), recent studies have underscored the crucial role of emotional intelligence (EI) in shaping EFL teachers' self-efficacy (Wang & Wang, 2022; Zhang & Wang, 2024). For instance, a meta-analysis by Wang and Wang (2022) found a substantial positive correlation between EI and self-efficacy among EFL teachers, indicating that EI enhances teachers' confidence in their teaching abilities. Similarly, a study by Zhang and Wang (2024) revealed that

EI is a significant predictor of self-efficacy among EFL teachers, with higher EI levels being associated with better stress management and increased confidence in teaching. These findings collectively highlight the importance of EI in fostering self-efficacy among EFL teachers.

2.4.4 Language proficiency as a unique contributor

For EFL teachers, language proficiency is a critical, context-specific factor. For example, Matsumura and Tatsuyama (2024) found that pre-service EFL teachers with higher English proficiency levels exhibited greater self-efficacy in implementing communicative language teaching during their teaching practicums. This is likely because higher proficiency enables them to more effectively deliver content and manage classroom interactions. This is consistent with the findings of Dzormeku et al. (2024), who discovered that pre-service teachers with fewer linguistic challenges exhibited higher self-efficacy.

Although these contributing factors have been investigated in several contexts, such as Japan and Finland (Yada et al., 2019), very little is known about the sources of teacher self-efficacy in the Chinese context, specifically pre-service teachers. Therefore, our study aims to fill this gap by exploring the unique contributing factors to self-efficacy that may differ from the previous ones.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants

The research participants included 59 respondents (5 males, 8%; 54 females, 92%) for the EFL Pre-service Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale. The participants consisted of undergraduate and graduate students from various academic years who enrolled in the same English teacher training program at a comprehensive university in Jiangsu Province, China. Among them, freshmen and sophomores had completed foundational education courses, equipping them with a solid theoretical background in teaching. Junior students had additionally participated in educational practicums, micro-teaching sessions, and simulated classroom activities. Senior students and graduate students had further engaged in off-campus teaching internships. All participants had accumulated practical experience through part-time work in training institutions, private tutoring, and community-based teaching activities. Additionally, two students were interviewed: one sophomore without internship experience (S1) and one first-year graduate student with internship experience (S2).

3.2 Instrument

The EFL Pre-service Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale was adapted from the general self-efficacy scale (GSE) (Schwarzer & Jerusalem, 1995), whose research emphasis closely aligns with that in this study in terms of assessing self-efficacy. Considering the specific context of pre-service EFL teaching, some items were adapted. For example, the item “I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough” in the original General Self-Efficacy Scale was rephrased as “I believe I can utilize a variety of teaching strategies to promote students’ foreign language learning” in the EFL Pre-service Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale. This revision narrows the general goal-achievement concept to the specific context of Using Teaching Strategies to boost students’ EFL learning. The questionnaire was translated and back-translated to ensure accuracy. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree).

The EFL Pre-service Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale includes a section on participants’ basic information (grade and gender) at the beginning. It comprises 9 items, which are categorized into three dimensions, including Using Teaching Strategies, Classroom Management, and Student Engagement. Using Teaching Strategies pertains to pre-service teachers’ ability to apply various teaching methods to enhance students’ foreign-language learning. Classroom Management represents pre-service teachers’ skills in organizing and controlling the classroom to ensure an orderly learning environment. Student Engagement indicates pre-service teachers’ capacity to encourage students to actively participate in the learning process. These three dimensions were proposed by Tschannen-Moran and Hoy (2001). The dimensions of the questionnaire are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Dimensions of the EFL pre-service teacher self-efficacy scale

Dimension	Item no.	<i>a</i>	Example
Using Teaching Strategies	1 6 9	0.627	I believe I can utilize a variety of teaching strategies to promote students' foreign language learning.
Classroom Management	3 4 7	0.732	I believe I can effectively organize and manage the classroom to ensure students' learning order and discipline.
Student Engagement	2 5 8	0.775	I believe I can help students develop a positive learning attitude and continuously encourage their active learning.
Total	-	0.889	-

The interviews were employed to explore more comprehensively the contributing factors to self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers, aiming to supplement and validate the findings from the quantitative analysis. By collecting qualitative data, we can gain insights into the personal experiences and perspectives of individual pre-service teachers, and investigate the factors affecting their self-efficacy in greater depth and detail. The interviewees were carefully chosen from the participants of the questionnaires. Specifically, two students were selected. One was a sophomore without internship experience, and the other was a first-year graduate student with internship experience. The questions of the semi-structured interview were designed to cover various aspects related to the contributing factors to self-efficacy. They focused on how pre-service teachers perceived and evaluated their teaching capabilities, what experiences and factors influenced their confidence in teaching, and how they coped with challenges and setbacks in the process of teaching practice. The interviews were conducted in Chinese to enable the students to fully grasp the questions and express their ideas openly and clearly.

3.3 Data collection and analysis

Data collection took place in two stages. In the first stage, on December 12, 2023, the quantitative data of the participants on the EFL Pre-service Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale was collected. The questionnaire was uploaded to Wenjuanxing (www.wjx.cn), a Chinese-based online platform specialized in survey dissemination and data retrieval. Before the survey, the participants were informed of the fundamental research information and the commitment to ensure their confidentiality. The participants filled in and submitted their questionnaires online. During data statistics, invalid samples were deleted. The second stage was the qualitative data collection of interviews. On December 30, 2023, two semi-structured interviews were conducted in Chinese to reduce participants' anxiety and obtain clear and accurate answers. All questionnaires were anonymous to protect privacy, ensure free expression, and increase the honesty of responses.

For the EFL Pre-service Teacher Self-Efficacy Scale, SPSS 27.0 was used for quantitative data analysis. Personal information was transformed into numeric codes. The scale was scored using the Likert 5-point method. After coding, descriptive statistics and an independent samples *t*-test were performed. Descriptive analyses were done to describe pre-service teachers' general self-efficacy levels, and the independent samples *t*-test was used to find grade differences.

For the semi-structured interview, the recordings of the two student interviews were transcribed into texts and double-checked for accuracy, and the contributing factors to self-efficacy were summarized in seven aspects: Introspection and emotional transfer, Internship experience and teaching practice, Feedback and encouragement, Observing the success of others, Success stories and overcoming challenges, Emotional and physical states, and Professional knowledge and skills.

4. Results

After data collection, the questionnaire data was analyzed by SPSS 27.0 with personal information coding and

Likert 5-point scoring, and descriptive statistics and the independent samples *t*-test were carried out. The interview data was transcribed and checked, and the contributing factors to self-efficacy were summarized through content analysis. The results will be presented in this section.

4.1 Self-efficacy levels of EFL pre-service teachers

Descriptive analysis was used to examine the levels of participants' self-efficacy in EFL teaching. The analysis results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Dimensional levels of self-efficacy (*N* = 59)

Dimension	Mean	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max
Using Teaching Strategies	3.97	0.74	2.33	5.00
Classroom Management	3.85	0.92	2.00	5.00
Student Engagement	3.79	0.93	1.67	5.00
Global self-efficacy	3.87	0.86	2.00	5.00

A 5-point Likert scale was adopted to evaluate self-efficacy, with a median score of 3.67. In this scale, higher scores were indicative of a greater extent of self-efficacy. As illustrated in Table 2, the mean score of global self-efficacy surpassed the median, which demonstrated that the self-efficacy level was above the mid-point of the five-point scale ($M = 3.87$; $SD = 0.86$). Among the three dimensions of self-efficacy, the mean value of the dimension related to the utilization of teaching strategies was the highest ($M = 3.97$; $SD = 0.74$). The mean score of the Classroom Management dimension ranked second ($M = 3.85$; $SD = 0.92$), and the Student Engagement dimension followed ($M = 3.79$; $SD = 0.93$). Qualitative interview data were also obtained to explicate this quantitative result, which are shown in the following extracts:

Extract 1

I think a rather difficult situation might be group work. Even though I'm not a teacher yet, I have a deep understanding of this. I think when it comes to implementing group work in schools in the future, some students may not be very cooperative and may be unwilling to participate. ... I believe that if I can successfully adopt appropriate teaching strategies according to the specific situations of students and the teaching context, I will be more confident in dealing with difficulties in teaching (S2).

Extract 2

Although I don't have formal experience in teaching a whole class yet, I usually feel quite confident during group presentations and simulated classrooms. Especially when I can clearly convey the teaching content and observe the positive responses from students, I feel extremely satisfied (S2).

Extract 3

In a simulated classroom, I tried using a new teaching method to stimulate students' interest in learning. The students responded enthusiastically and actively participated in the discussion. This experience made me realize that as long as I dare to try and innovate, I can effectively attract students' attention (S1).

Extract 4

During my internship, I was in charge of a group project where students needed to work together to complete a task. I noticed that when I provided them with appropriate guidance and encouragement, they could finish the task well. This experience made me believe that I have the ability to guide students to cooperate effectively in a team (S1).

When studying the self-efficacy of Chinese EFL pre-service teachers, the interview excerpts revealed that pre-service teachers had a high level of self-efficacy, which was consistent with the results of the quantitative analysis. Specifically, pre-service teachers demonstrated a high level of self-efficacy in different teaching situations. For example,

one teacher indicated that she could handle teaching difficulties based on the specific circumstances of students and her existing knowledge foundation, reflecting her self-efficacy in using teaching strategies. These findings were also reflected in the study by Ikeda et al. (2025). Another teacher successfully guided students to cooperate in a group project, demonstrating her self-efficacy in classroom management, which aligned with Kolay and Mirici's (2024) study. In addition, one teacher performed well in handling student conflicts, reflecting her ability to remain calm and manage effectively in complex situations. These findings also reflect that pre-service teachers can actively respond to pressures from students and personal aspects. Through theoretical learning, internships, and simulated teaching, pre-service teachers not only accumulate valuable experience (Cheung et al., 2023; Matsumura & Tatsuyama, 2024) but also receive positive feedback, thus having a high level of self-efficacy.

4.2 Grade differences in self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers

As presented in Table 3, the independent samples *t*-test revealed that the grade differences (between seniors, graduate students, and freshmen, sophomores, juniors) were not significant at the level of global self-efficacy ($df = 57, t = 1.269, p = 0.210$). In other words, although senior and graduate students (Grade ≥ 4) showed slightly higher mean scores in self-efficacy compared to freshmen, sophomores, and juniors (Grade < 4), these differences were not statistically significant. This suggests that the progression through academic years and the accumulation of teaching experience did not lead to a substantial increase in self-efficacy among the participants.

Table 3. Grade difference in self-efficacy

Dimension	Grade ≥ 4 ($n = 7$)		Grade < 4 ($n = 52$)		MD	<i>t</i>	Sig.
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>			
Using Teaching Strategies	4.24	0.14	3.94	0.82	0.30	-1.298	0.199
Classroom Management	3.71	0.62	3.46	0.76	0.26	-0.867	0.390
Student Engagement	3.95	0.78	3.62	0.80	0.33	-1.029	0.308
Global self-efficacy	4.03	0.51	3.71	0.64	0.32	-1.269	0.210

4.3 Contributing factors to self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers

To comprehensively understand the self-efficacy of Chinese EFL pre-service teachers, it is essential to identify the key factors that contribute to its development. Through an in-depth analysis of our interview data, we have identified seven significant factors that influence the self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers: (1) Introspection and Emotional Transfer, (2) Internship Experience and Teaching Practice, (3) Feedback and Encouragement, (4) Observing the Success of Others, (5) Success Stories and Overcoming Challenges, (6) Emotional and Physical States, and (7) Professional Knowledge and Skills. Each of these factors plays a unique and vital role in shaping the self-efficacy levels of pre-service teachers. The following provides a detailed examination of each factor.

4.3.1 Introspection and emotional transfer

One interviewee reported that she engages in self-reflection after teaching practice and transfers positive emotions from previous experiences to subsequent teaching sessions, thereby enhancing her teaching self-efficacy. Specifically, she stated:

I will reflect promptly after each class and seek feedback from teachers and mentors to address any issues in my teaching. If I encounter difficulties, I draw on positive emotions from previous successful experiences to regulate my current emotions and motivate myself to improve. This process has significantly boosted my self-efficacy (S1).

Moreover, reflection is viewed as a self-healing mechanism that mitigates feelings of powerlessness associated with negative experiences. Another participant emphasized this aspect:

Self-reflection helps maintain a stable sense of self-efficacy by preventing it from deteriorating. It is a continuous process of self-healing, ensuring that I do not succumb to feelings of powerlessness (S2).

4.3.2 Internship experience and teaching practice

Internship experience and teaching practice are crucial for pre-service teachers to develop classroom management skills and thus enhance self-efficacy. For instance, one participant noted that regular interaction with students and teaching experience enabled her to better anticipate and handle unexpected questions or classroom situations.

When I conduct student lectures, I can promptly supplement my knowledge by assessing the level of interaction between myself and the students. This helps me prepare for sudden questions or responses in class. Over time, repeated practice builds my self-confidence, allowing me to anticipate and address classroom challenges more effectively, thereby enhancing my self-efficacy (S1).

Moreover, only through real teaching can teachers understand students' needs and facilitate effective classroom instruction. For example, one participant reported that working closely with students helped her balance values-shaping education with exam-oriented teaching.

On one hand, the teaching process builds my self-confidence through practice and experience, motivating me to teach more effectively in subsequent classes. On the other hand, close contact with students helps me understand their needs. Although we advocate for quality education beyond exam orientation, in real high schools, students still face significant exam pressures. As a teacher, I need to find a balance between shaping students' values and addressing their exam-focused mindset through practical experience. Thus, experience is more important than basic knowledge in promoting my self-efficacy (S1).

In contrast, S2 expressed uncertainty about her self-efficacy due to a lack of internship experience:

I'm not sure because we haven't engaged in off-campus teaching internships yet, that is, real teaching practice in front of a whole class of students. What I've done was just part-time work in training institutions or private tutoring (S2).

4.3.3 Feedback and encouragement

Verbal persuasion can enhance efficacy beliefs when positive and sincere evaluations align with an individual's capabilities (Schunk, 1984). For example, one participant indicated that feedback helped her to be more serious, responsible, and attentive in her lesson planning. Specifically, the encouragement boosted her confidence and reinforced her belief in her ability to effectively deliver a lesson.

I find that self-evaluation is valuable, especially when it is supported by feedback from teachers. For instance, a teacher's assessment that I was serious and responsible in my lesson planning and that my lesson design was attentive, provided affirmation. This positive evaluation aligned with my own perception of my capabilities and reinforced my belief that I am capable of delivering effective lessons (S2).

4.3.4 Observing the success of others

Efficacy beliefs can be significantly influenced by observing and modeling the achievements of others (Bandura, 1977). For example, one participant reported that comparing her teaching performance to that of highly regarded classes enhanced her self-efficacy.

In my experience, this comparative approach also serves to boost my self-efficacy. When I compare my lessons to those delivered by so-called high-quality teachers, I find that my teaching aligns more closely with the new curriculum standards. This realization, while somewhat subjective, contributes to building my self-efficacy to a considerable extent (S1).

However, when individuals assess their abilities, the levels of stress or the inclinations towards negative emotions can diminish their perceived self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997).

I have seen some high-quality teaching videos of very good front-line teachers. It's still encouraging for me to meet a lot of very good and powerful foreign language teachers. But to be honest, I feel that my self-efficacy has decreased

to a certain extent. Because I think that compared with those excellent teachers, I may find that I still have too much to learn. When faced with problems like theirs, it may be that you can't be as comfortable as they are (S2).

On the other hand, I will also see excellent teaching designs. The teacher's grasp of the whole class, the management of discipline, and the interaction in the classroom, etc., make me feel amazing. I often watch them repeatedly. However, in the face of such high-quality classes, I will also feel a little ashamed of myself, and this lowers my self-efficacy a little bit (S1).

4.3.5 Success stories and overcoming challenges

Reflecting on past failures and learning from them can provide individuals with valuable insights and enhance their confidence (Chen & Usher, 2013). Additionally, perceiving past achievements positively has been shown to improve self-efficacy significantly. By building on successful experiences, individuals can foster self-encouragement and support, which ultimately strengthens their self-efficacy. For example, one participant reported gaining confidence through successful experiences and overcoming obstacles.

In my own case, the influencing factor is primarily my personal experience. I have systematically reflected on past failures, extracted lessons from them, and given myself constructive advice. This process has helped me move forward and maintain a higher level of confidence. I also draw on my successful experiences as a foundation for self-encouragement, recalling my continuous efforts and the support I have received in the past (S1).

4.3.6 Emotional and physical states

The broaden-and-build theory in positive psychology contends that the encounter with positive emotions, such as enjoyment, can widen an individual's thought-action repertoires. Simultaneously, it contributes to the cultivation of enduring personal resources, covering physical, intellectual, social, and psychological aspects (Fredrickson, 2001). In the context of EFL teaching, this suggests that EFL teachers maintaining a positive attitude and emotional state, along with seeking support from others and engaging in self-care activities, are important aspects of improving self-efficacy as a teacher. In this way, they can actively seek out and apply new teaching techniques in the long run. For example, both participants said that their mood had a great impact on them.

The final aspect I think is maintaining a positive attitude and emotional state. While it is natural for individuals to experience emotional fluctuations, including occasional low periods, I generally approach my profession as a teacher with a positive and confident mindset. On one hand, my positive outlook is rooted in my early experiences with teachers who were kind and supportive, inspiring me to become a teacher myself. On the other hand, I actively employ emotional regulation strategies to manage my mood and maintain a balanced emotional state. This helps me navigate the challenges of teaching while sustaining a positive and proactive attitude (S1).

While I may subconsciously experience sadness or discouragement, I consciously choose to conceal these emotions so that my students remain unaware. I believe it is crucial to quickly recover from negative feelings, as a teacher's mood significantly influences the learning environment. To maintain a positive demeanor, I might engage in physical exercises to ensure my health and simultaneously regulate my mood. After adjusting my emotional state, I may seek advice from other teachers or colleagues on strategies to address the sources of frustration (S2).

4.3.7 Professional knowledge and skills

Engaging in various teaching skills can enhance self-efficacy by providing tangible evidence of growth and visible improvements. For instance, one participant reported that her self-efficacy was significantly improved through deliberate practice in multiple areas, including calligraphy, chalkboard writing, hard pen writing, lesson design, and communication skills.

From the planning perspective, I believe that the key to enhancing my sense of self-efficacy lies in practice-continuous practice. Teaching skills can be broken down into various components. It's not just about knowledge; it also includes basic writing skills, how to design a lesson, and how to present it effectively. I think that through more practice, I can clearly see my progress. For example, I can observe tangible improvements in my chalkboard writing (S1).

In addition, both participants affirmed the importance of theoretical knowledge.

The theory is also important. Because it's a foundation for me to design a course, model a class, and then observe other good and high-quality courses, without that, I might not have all those other experiences (S1).

I think the first thing is the professional level; that is, first of all, you must be familiar with and master your teaching content, that is, you can answer the students' difficult questions (S2).

5. Discussion

In this section, we will provide a detailed examination of the levels of self-efficacy among EFL pre-service teachers, differences across grades, and the factors that influence their self-efficacy. The descriptive analysis results of this study indicate that most EFL pre-service teachers demonstrate self-efficacy levels ranging from moderate to high. This finding aligns with previous research by Nugroho (2017) and Safitri (2021), suggesting a general trend of relatively high self-efficacy among pre-service teachers in this field. However, significant individual variation was observed, highlighting the need to consider the diverse experiences and perceptions of pre-service teachers. In the Chinese context of higher education, the relatively high self-efficacy levels among EFL pre-service teachers can have positive implications for language teaching practices. Pre-service teachers with high self-efficacy are more likely to take the initiative to design innovative teaching plans, incorporate new teaching methods, and actively engage with students during practice teaching (Han & Wang, 2021; Matsumura & Tatsuyama, 2024). This can contribute to a more dynamic and effective language learning environment.

Regarding the second research question, our analysis did not reveal any statistically significant differences in self-efficacy levels across different grades. This finding challenges the common assumption that higher education levels, characterized by accumulated teaching theories and practical experiences, would invariably lead to higher self-efficacy (Hoang & Wyatt, 2021; Klassen & Tze, 2014). However, it is noteworthy that seniors and graduate students exhibited slightly higher self-efficacy levels compared to freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. This suggests that advanced education and exposure to various teaching programs may have a positive impact on self-efficacy. This could be attributed to the accumulation of practical teaching experience and a deeper understanding of teaching theories as pre-service teachers progress through their academic journey (Mok et al., 2023). Future research should further investigate the specific mechanisms through which educational progression influences self-efficacy development. In the Chinese higher education context, although the grade-based differences in self-efficacy are not significant, the slightly higher self-efficacy of seniors and graduate students still has implications. These students can serve as role models for junior students. Universities can organize peer-to-peer learning activities where seniors and graduate students share their teaching experiences and skills, which may help junior students enhance their self-efficacy and teaching capabilities. Additionally, it also indicates that continuous exposure to teaching-related experiences during the academic process is beneficial. Thus, universities should ensure that students at all grades have access to quality teaching practice opportunities, such as early-stage teaching internships and more in-depth teaching theory courses.

To address our third research question, this study identified seven factors of self-efficacy. These factors include introspection and emotional transfer, internship experience and teaching practice, feedback and encouragement, observing the success of others, success stories and overcoming challenges, emotional and physical states, and professional knowledge and skills. This finding aligns with Bandura's (1997) social cognitive theory, which posits that self-efficacy is influenced by mastery experiences, vicarious experiences, social persuasions, and physiological and emotional states. Introspection and emotional transfer are highlighted in enhancing self-efficacy. This aligns with the findings of Zhang and Wang (2024), which emphasize self-awareness and emotional management in building confidence. Meanwhile, internship experiences and teaching practice offer pre-service teachers the chance to apply theoretical knowledge, thereby increasing their teaching confidence. This finding is consistently shown in the studies by Hußner et al. (2023). Additionally, feedback and encouragement from mentors and peers serve as social persuasion that significantly boosts pre-service teachers' self-efficacy, as demonstrated by Moradkhani and Haghi (2017), and Phan and Locke (2015). Observing the successes of experienced teachers provides vicarious experiences that motivate pre-service teachers to improve their teaching practice, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy. Furthermore, reflecting on success stories and overcoming challenges allows pre-service teachers to draw on their past achievements and failures as sources of self-encouragement and support, which is supported by the study of Chen and Usher (2013). Maintaining a positive

emotional and physical state, as suggested by the broaden-and-build theory (Fredrickson, 2001), can broaden one's cognitive and behavioral repertoires, leading to enhanced self-efficacy. Lastly, professional knowledge and skills lay a solid foundation for confident and effective teaching, as Zhang and Fang (2022) have shown that a strong foundation in pedagogical content knowledge is essential for developing self-efficacy in teaching.

To deeply explore the impact of these factors on the teaching practices of EFL pre-service teachers in the context of higher education in China, these factors need to be integrated into the professional development and teaching strategies of EFL pre-service teachers. First, introspection and emotional regulation are particularly important for EFL pre-service teachers. Through regular self-reflection, teachers can identify and manage their emotional responses, thereby maintaining a positive attitude in teaching (Heng et al., 2024). This self-awareness not only contributes to the personal growth of teachers but also fosters a supportive learning environment by conveying positive emotions to students (Zhang & Wang, 2024). Second, the combination of internship experiences and teaching practice is crucial for enhancing the self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers (Eginli & Solhi, 2021). Universities and educational institutions should provide more internship opportunities, allowing teachers to apply theoretical knowledge in real teaching environments. Through regular teaching feedback and peer evaluation, teachers can continuously improve their teaching methods and enhance their confidence. Third, the role of feedback and encouragement is indispensable in the growth of EFL pre-service teachers (Li & Peng, 2024). Teacher training programs should include training on how to give and receive feedback to strengthen the social support network of teachers (Abdelhalim & Alsahil, 2025). By establishing positive teacher-student relationships and collaboration among colleagues, teachers can gain more social persuasion, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy. Fourth, observing the successful experiences of others provides valuable vicarious experiences for EFL pre-service teachers. By observing the classrooms of excellent teachers, teachers can learn effective teaching strategies and management techniques (Li et al., 2023; Matsumura & Tatsuyama, 2024). This vicarious experience not only inspires teachers' enthusiasm for teaching but also helps them overcome obstacles in teaching. Fifth, the experiences of success stories and overcoming challenges are important sources of self-motivation for EFL pre-service teachers (Fithriani, 2023). Teachers should encourage students to share their learning experiences, drawing inspiration and motivation from them. At the same time, teachers should also learn from their own successes and failures, continuously adjusting their teaching strategies to meet the needs of different students. Sixth, it is crucial for teachers to focus on emotional management and stress reduction to maintain good psychological and physical well-being. By providing regular mental health training and teaching relaxation techniques, teachers can better cope with the pressures of teaching, thereby enhancing their self-efficacy in the classroom (Schwartz-Bechet, 2023). Finally, the enhancement of professional knowledge and skills is the foundation for the confidence and effective teaching of EFL pre-service teachers (Rogerson-Revell et al., 2024). Universities and educational institutions should provide systematic teaching theory and practical courses to help teachers establish a solid foundation of educational content knowledge. Through continuous professional development, teachers can continuously improve their teaching abilities, providing high-quality English language instruction for students.

Despite the significant findings and implications of this study, there remain some limitations. First, the findings cannot be generalized to all EFL pre-service teachers in China due to the limited sample of the quantitative study. The study's participants were exclusively from Jiangsu Province, a region with potentially more extensive educational resources and comprehensive programs, which could lead to higher self-efficacy levels among them compared to others in China. Second, there is a gender imbalance in the study. The male participants in the two questionnaires represent a tiny portion, and both interviewees are female pre-service teachers. Future research should aim to include a more balanced representation of genders to explore differences in EFL teaching self-efficacy. Last, the duration of this research may not be sufficient to fully evaluate the self-efficacy experienced by the participants. Future research should consider conducting studies over an extended period to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the sources and changes in self-efficacy of EFL pre-service teachers throughout certain educational programs and practical experiences.

6. Conclusions

Using descriptive statistics and independent samples *t*-test, the present study investigated the self-efficacy of Chinese pre-service teachers in EFL teaching. It was found that the participants generally had a relatively high level

of self-efficacy. Additionally, slight differences in self-efficacy were observed across different grades, with seniors and graduate students reporting slightly higher levels than freshmen, sophomores, and juniors. The study also identified seven categories of factors contributing to the self-efficacy of the participants in EFL teaching. This study adds value to the existing literature by offering a comprehensive understanding of the current state of pre-service teachers' self-efficacy in EFL teaching and pinpointing its various influence factors. These insights can be used to design more effective interventions and training programs.

Based on the research results, the following implications are proposed. Firstly, pre-service teachers need to be motivated to engage in reflective practice to recognize their strengths and areas for growth. Since self-reflection can enhance self-efficacy, it is vital for pre-service teachers to actively participate in teaching practice and promptly reflect on their teaching experiences. Secondly, practical teaching experiences play a significant role in shaping pre-service teachers' self-efficacy. Universities should provide more opportunities for students to engage in teaching practice within their training courses, such as simulating specific classroom situations and creating unexpected scenarios to enhance pre-service teachers' ability to respond promptly. Thirdly, maintaining a positive emotional state and seeking support from others can improve self-efficacy. Educational programs are recommended to prioritize promoting self-care practices and fostering supportive networks, including providing training on stress management techniques, and mindfulness exercises, and encouraging peer feedback and mentorship programs. Lastly, when observing model classes, EFL pre-service teachers should focus on the individual progress in professional knowledge and skills rather than striving for perfection to avoid anxiety and a decrease in self-efficacy.

Ethics statement

The studies involving human participants were reviewed and approved by the School of Foreign Languages, Soochow University, China. Written informed consent to participate in this study was provided by the participants. Written informed consent was obtained from the individual(s) for the publication of any potentially identifiable images or data included in this article.

Acknowledgments

We are grateful for the constructive suggestions provided by the reviewers.

Conflict of interest

The authors state that they have no conflicting interests.

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