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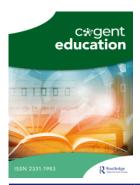
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Exploring the use of self-assessment in Chinese primary school EFL teaching: teachers' perspectives and practices in Shanghai, Shenzhen and Jiangsu

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ABSTRACT

This study explores self-assessment (SA) practices and perceptions among primary school English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in China. Data were collected through a qualitative web-based questionnaire from 97 EFL teachers in primary public schools across Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Jiangsu. The results indicated a general consensus among teachers on the value of SA for improving student learning and teaching practice. However, current implementation practices appeared less promising, with many teachers employing it infrequently and primarily using it as a measurement tool. Factors influencing their SA implementation were also identified, including students' age and learning ability, effective assessment criteria, large class sizes, exam-oriented culture, sufficient professional knowledge and skills, and parental support. This study suggests that despite most teachers having a positive perception of SA, there is room for improvement in their practices, with a need to promote more regular and formative use of SA. Also, this study underscores the importance of addressing factors affecting the implementation of SA into teaching practices in the Chinese educational context.

IMPACT STATEMENT

Self-assessment is essential in foreign language education by helping learners take an active role in evaluating their progress and identifying areas for improvement. Previous studies show that self-assessment improves academic performance, student autonomy, self-regulation, and motivation. These studies also emphasize the significant role of teachers in providing the guidance and support necessary to make self-assessment effective. Building on this, our study explores Chinese primary school EFL teachers' perspectives on and practices of self-assessment, shedding light on how it is implemented in real classrooms. The findings offer insights for foreign language teachers, policymakers, administrators, and teacher educators aiming to improve language teaching and teacher training in similar contexts.

Introduction

The advent of learner-centered pedagogies has spotlighted the significance of self-assessment (SA) in the domain of language education. SA, defined by Brown and Harris (2013, p. 368) as 'a descriptive and evaluative act carried out by the student concerning his or her own work and academic abilities,' is pivotal in fostering learner autonomy (Little, 2011; Mäkipää et al., 2023). Empirical research indicates that SA positively influences students by enhancing their academic performance, self-regulation, sense of self-efficacy, and motivation (Al-Rashidi et al., 2022; Kumar et al., 2023; Panadero et al., 2017; Yan et al., 2020). Acknowledged for its positive benefits and central significance, SA has been integrated as an essential element of foreign language teaching (FLT), finding its place in the curricula and textbooks of numerous countries (Butler, 2016, 2024). Although there is a growing interest in SA as a tool to enhance

language learning and overall student development, there is still a notable lack of insight into how SA is applied at the primary school level (Butler & Lee, 2010; Hung et al., 2016).

China is no different in this regard. The country has seen significant reforms in English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching in the last twenty years, particularly after English became compulsory in primary schools in 2001. These reforms, driven by globalization, have shifted the curriculum toward a communicative, competency-based approach, moving away from traditional rote learning and teacher-centered methods (Clark, 2013; Coombs et al., 2022; Hu & McKay, 2012). The English Curriculum Standard for Compulsory Education (Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China, 2011, 2022) advocates for student-centered assessment, highlighting the significance of fostering learner autonomy by engaging students in their learning process and taking responsibility for their learning. Additionally, it emphasizes the importance of EFL teachers in motivating students to adopt the roles of designers, participants, and collaborators in different assessment activities. Teachers are encouraged to facilitate students' involvement in SA and peer assessment processes and to promote active reflection and evaluation of their learning. The support for SA is also echoed in textbooks. For instance, *English (Grade Three as Starting Point)* (2013) includes a 'Ticking Time' session at the end of each unit, allowing students to rate their mastery of the unit's knowledge and skills with stars. Despite its simple design, the intention is to integrate SA into mainstream assessment practices. Given the autonomy of local education authorities in selecting textbook versions, different areas across China use differing textbooks, and not all of these contain a section dedicated to SA.

Despite SA being advocated in the curriculum and incorporated into some textbooks, it is not as prevalent in primary school EFL teaching. Most research on SA in China has primarily focused on the university and secondary education levels, with comparatively less attention given to its implementation at the primary school level (Liu & Brantmeier, 2019; Wu et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). The limited studies that have been conducted at the primary school level have not been able to provide a comprehensive overview of SA practices in Chinese primary school EFL teaching, as they have either focused on theoretical dimensions (Li, 2022) or included small sample sizes (Yan et al., 2021). This gap signifies a need for empirical research on Chinese primary school EFL teachers' attitudes, experiences, and practices regarding SA. Moreover, the factors influencing the implementation of SA in this context have yet to be fully explored. This study seeks to fill the identified research gap by examining Chinese primary school EFL teachers' perspectives and practices of implementing SA, contributing to a more in-depth and comprehensive understanding of its role and efficacy in EFL teaching.

Literature review

In this literature review, we first provide an overview of SA in Overview of self-assessment, discussing its theoretical framework, benefits, and concerns. Then, in Earlier studies on self-assessment in foreign language teaching, we review previous studies on SA in FLT, focusing on primary school settings and exploring teachers' attitudes and practices.

Overview of self-assessment

SA, an essential component of FLT, is defined by Harris (1997) as a method that empowers students to appraise their learning process to remain focused on their learning. Harris elaborates that SA supports students to become more aware of personal progress, concentrating on language performance instead of mere knowledge acquisition, and encourages them to reflect on their performance (1997, p. 15). Following Boud (1995), SA involves students specifying criteria or standards to which their work should be held and judging the degree to which these have been fulfilled. Dolosic (2018) describes SA as the learner's appraisal of their own abilities or performances. These definitions underscore students' active participation in the assessment process, although serving distinct purposes. Butler (2023) corroborates this view by noting the multifaceted nature of SA, emphasizing its dual functions: as a tool for measurement and as a tool for learning (p. 192).

Theoretical framework of self-assessment

While scholars may have different interpretations of the purpose of SA, Butler (2023) contends that SA's true advantage lies in its use as a tool for learning. Butler explains that in assessment for learning, learners transition from being passive subjects of measurement to active participants who interpret their learning and take actions aimed at formative improvement (2016, p. 301). This *active involvement* is emphasized by both constructivist learning theory and self-regulated learning (SRL) theory.

In early language education, Butler (2016) asserts that SA, when employed as a learning tool, should be designed to help learners comprehend task objectives, reflect on their learning relative to these goals, monitor their learning processes, and determine what is necessary to achieve the desired outcomes (p. 305). This perspective is well-supported by SRL theory, which emphasizes *self-regulation* as learners engage in setting goals and planning strategies, implementing these strategies while self-monitoring and evaluating their performance and the effectiveness of their strategies for future learning (Zimmerman, 2002, pp. 67–68). Furthermore, *metacognition* plays a critical role in this process, as learners need to be aware of their learning—what they know or have learned—and possess strategies to control, direct, adjust, and steer their learning (McMillan & Hearn, 2008; Wenden, 1998).

The concepts of *active involvement*, *self-regulation*, and *metacognition* provide valuable theoretical lenses for understanding SA as a learning tool in early language education. Building on this foundation, our research explores teachers' perspectives and practices regarding SA, aiming to gain insights that can inform and guide its implementation in primary foreign language classrooms.

Benefits of self-assessment for language teachers and students

A review of the current literature on SA reveals widespread agreement on its positive impact, highlighting numerous benefits for students and teachers. Evidence shows that SA can positively affect students' academic performance (Hung, 2019; Phuong et al., 2023). Beyond academic performance, SA is instrumental in developing self-regulated learning skills (Kumar et al., 2023; Vasu et al., 2022), fostering learner autonomy (Little, 2011; Qasem, 2020), and increasing metacognitive awareness (Birjandi & Hadidi Tamjid, 2012; Ebrahimi et al., 2021). Finally, SA plays a central role in boosting motivation, engagement, and self-efficacy (Brown & Harris, 2013, p. 368). Gardner (2000) and Riswanto et al. (2022) note that high levels of SA can boost learner motivation and engagement. Takarroucht's (2022) study further highlights SA's effectiveness in increasing students' self-efficacy in writing. While the literature on SA's benefits is well-documented from secondary to university levels, fewer studies focus on the primary level.

As well as being a beneficial tool for students, SA offers a range of benefits for teachers. By integrating SA into teaching practice, teachers can experience a decrease in workload as students become more responsible for their learning, assessing their progress, and identifying areas for improvement (Phuong et al., 2023). In addition to relieving teachers of the burden, this shift frees up time for more individualized instruction and better support (Gardner, 2000). Implementing SA also fosters a stronger teacher-student relationship and interaction (Butler & Lee, 2010). When students are involved in SA, they become more open to seeking feedback and guidance, fostering a collaborative learning environment.

Concerns about self-assessment implementation in second/foreign language education context

Despite the many benefits of SA for language teaching and learning, there are concerns regarding its implementation, particularly about the accuracy of SA. These concerns arise from several factors. Firstly, item-related factors play a crucial role. How SA items are designed and administered can greatly affect students' ability to self-assess accurately (Butler, 2023). For instance, Butler (2018) notes that vague descriptors like 'follow' and 'understand' may lead to varied interpretations, potentially distorting assessment results (pp. 249-250). Secondly, student-related factors such as language proficiency, academic ability, previous SA experience, personality, and motivation influence SA accuracy (Brantmeier et al., 2012; Keane & Griffin, 2018; Ma & Winke, 2019). In addition, personality factors like overconfidence or self-doubt can skew SA towards overestimation or underestimation, respectively (Cuesta-Melo et al., 2022). However, Black and Wiliam (1998) argue that the issue with SA is not students' reliability but their lack of clear understanding of learning objectives. Thirdly, teacher-related factors, including attitudes toward SA, implementing experiences, and assessment literacy, are equally influential (Wu et al., 2021; Zhang

et al., 2022). Lastly, societal and institutional factors such as teachers' and parents' expectations, existing evaluation systems, and the extent of support for teacher professional development within institutions are also considered crucial (Butler, 2023; Lee & Coniam, 2013; Liu & Xu, 2017).

Earlier studies on self-assessment in foreign language teaching

Self-assessment in primary school foreign language teaching

Although there is increasing interest in using SA in FLT, it has not had such a strong presence in primary school FLT (Butler, 2016). Most previous research on SA in FLT has been in higher and secondary education (Benraghda et al., 2022; Mäkipää, 2021; Takarroucht, 2022). Considering the concerns mentioned above, especially regarding the age and capabilities of younger learners, research on SA within the primary school setting remains scant (Butler & Lee, 2006; Rixon, 2023; Yan, 2018).

The few studies conducted in the FLT at the primary school level have looked at different aspects of SA, including its feasibility with young learners, its impact on learner confidence and language proficiency, the role of context in assessments, and the influence of factors like motivation, self-efficacy, and feedback on SA accuracy. Hung et al. (2016) explored the use of SA in primary English classrooms, specifically evaluating sixth graders' oral presentations. Their findings suggest that even young learners can effectively engage in SA with proper support. Butler and Lee's (2006) study with 151 Korean primary students finds that students' self-assessments of their oral performance are more accurate during on-task assessments (specific English tasks) than off-task assessments (broader, context-free evaluations), underlining the vital role of context in conducting SA with young learners. Butler and Lee (2010) investigated the impact of SA on young EFL learners and found significant gains in confidence and language proficiency. Their research also suggests that consistent SA practice can lead to more accurate SA by students. Another study by Butler (2018) on Japanese primary students revealed that both personal factors (motivation, self-efficacy, age) and social-environmental factors (feedback) affect how students respond to SA, revealing the complex interactions involved.

Teachers' attitudes and practices of self-assessment in foreign language teaching

The above studies emphasize that successful SA relies on careful execution, which includes clear teacher guidance, thoughtfully created questions, and sufficient support. Teachers play a significant role in facilitating this process. In the context of language education, Borg (2018) highlights that teachers' beliefs affect their instructional practices. Within the assessment context, Butler and Lee (2010) emphasize that teachers' perceptions of assessment influence their practices, which, in turn, influence students' SA. This view is supported by other studies, including that of Harris and Brown (2013) and Black and Wiliam (1998). For this reason, we reviewed the literature on teachers' attitudes and practices of SA in FLT across different educational levels to explore these dynamics and inform how SA practices might be adapted and effectively applied in the primary education context.

Mäkipää's (2021) research on Finnish upper secondary foreign language teachers reveals that all interviewed teachers used SA, though with variations in implementation—some used it summatively, others formatively. However, most did not teach students how to develop SA skills. The study also indicates the diverse use of SA, including open-ended questions, feedback questionnaires, word tests, and textbook activities. Bullock's (2011) research shows that while teachers acknowledged SA's advantages—including enhancing students' self-awareness and motivation—they had reservations about its practicality, questioning students' capacity for SA, the time required, and the challenges in motivating and directing students to set goals. In Butler and Lee's (2010) study on Korean primary school students, both teachers acknowledged SA's effectiveness, but one expressed reservations about integrating SA with summative assessment. They emphasized the importance of clear initial guidance, suggesting fewer, more focused items for frequent SA practices. They also discussed challenges in providing effective feedback.

In the Chinese context, Zhang et al. (2022) investigated Chinese EFL teachers' attitudes and self-efficacy beliefs in using SA in university writing classes. While teachers show positive attitudes toward SA, its use in practice was limited due to gaps in knowledge, experience, and appreciation of student-centered assessments. The study highlights the need for professional development to raise teachers'

assessment literacy. Wu et al. (2021) find that Chinese university EFL teachers seldom used SA due to time constraints and limited understanding. Although one teacher reported frequent SA use, observations showed minimal student engagement with SA. The study recommends teacher education programs to enhance assessment knowledge and skills. Yan et al. (2021) support similar findings, noting that a Chinese primary school EFL teacher used SA sporadically and another did so without clear success criteria, causing student confusion. Challenges such as limited teacher knowledge, preference for norm-referenced assessments, students' difficulty with criteria, large class sizes, and an exam-centric culture were identified. The study recommends improving teacher education with subject content knowledge and actionable assessment guidelines.

The literature shows that while teachers generally express positive attitudes toward SA, its practical application remains limited. Even in studies where teachers report frequent SA use, a gap exists between their stated practices and actual classroom behaviors. Phipps and Borg (2009) confirm this mismatch, showing that language teachers' beliefs do not always correspond with their practices (p. 386). This emphasizes the need to understand teachers' beliefs to support effective SA implementation.

Research questions

As indicated by the literature review, there is a limited understanding of Chinese primary school EFL teachers' views and practices of SA. To this end, this study investigates the views and experiences of teachers in public schools in Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Jiangsu on integrating SA into EFL teaching. It aims to address the following research questions:

1. How do Chinese primary school EFL teachers perceive self-assessment in primary school EFL teaching?
2. How is self-assessment implemented in EFL teaching in Chinese primary schools?
3. What factors influence Chinese primary school EFL teachers' self-assessment implementation?

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach, ideal for exploring Chinese primary school EFL teachers' views on SA through their personal experiences (see Cohen et al., 2011). Selecting a qualitative approach was appropriate, given the scarce research on SA at the primary level in China. Its exploratory nature facilitates an in-depth exploration of this understudied topic (see Johnson & Christensen, 2014).

Participants

To provide sufficient depth and breadth of data, we targeted a sample of 100 EFL teachers from Chinese public primary schools in Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Jiangsu. These regions were chosen for their reputable education standards and active role in spearheading educational reforms in China (OECD, 2016). Of the 100 responses received, two teachers were from private schools, and one did not give consent, resulting in their exclusion. This left 97 participating teachers, with 25 from Shanghai, 24 from Shenzhen, and 48 from Jiangsu. Most teachers (n = 79) have bachelor's degrees, while a few (n = 16) have achieved higher levels of education, such as master's or doctor's degrees. Only two teachers have qualifications that fall short of a bachelor's degree. The teaching experience among the teachers varies widely, spanning from less than two years to more than twenty-one years. In this study, the participants were anonymized and assigned codes ranging from Teacher 1 to Teacher 97 to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

Data collection

In this study, data were collected through a qualitative web-based questionnaire. This allowed the participating teachers to share their thoughts and experiences about SA and elaborate on and explain their answers (see Braun et al., 2021; Cohen et al., 2011). Drawing from the literature review (Brown & Harris,

2013; Butler, 2023; Mäkipää, 2021; Yan et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022), a questionnaire comprising 21 items was developed. This included questions to gather demographic details such as education level, years of experience teaching EFL at the primary level, grades taught, the number of class groups instructed, and the type of school. The questionnaire also included open-ended questions to gain teachers' perspectives and practices related to SA in primary school EFL teaching. Details of the specific open-ended questions can be found in Table 1. Initially, the questionnaire was developed in English and subsequently translated by the first author into Chinese to make it easier for the teachers to understand. Multiple readings were performed to ensure the translation was clear and faithful to the original questionnaire's intended meaning.

The questionnaire was created using Webropol to ensure a wider reach and convenience for participants. To pilot the questionnaire, it was sent to 15 Chinese EFL teachers from primary schools via WeChat, a widely used messaging and calling application in China, to ensure all questions were clear and understandable in the Chinese context. Following the pilot phase, adjustments were made to the questions to improve their clarity. The participants were recruited through convenience sampling, targeting those willing or readily available to participate (see Johnson & Christensen, 2014). The first author contacted primary school principals and senior EFL teachers in Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Jiangsu, who were acquaintances. They were then asked to distribute the questionnaire link to willing teachers within their respective schools through WeChat.

This study adhered to the guidelines of the Finnish National Research Integrity in Human Sciences (TENK, 2019, 2023). Ethical approval was not required as the research did not involve deviations from informed consent or physical interventions (TENK, 2019, p. 17). All necessary consent agreements were obtained, ensuring no risk to participants' health and safety (TENK, 2023, p. 13). The first page of the questionnaire outlined the research details, including data storage, processing, reporting, and participants' rights. Only participants who gave their consent were directed to the questionnaire content; otherwise, the questionnaire was ended. All 97 participating teachers gave their consent to this study. To safeguard participants' voluntary engagement in the research, answering the questionnaire items was not mandatory. As a result, not all participants responded to every question, leading to different response rates for the questionnaire items. Acknowledging this, our analysis considers the different response rates when interpreting the data and drawing conclusions. The response rates for each questionnaire item pertinent to the study's research questions are shown in Table 1. The data collection phase took place from December 2023 to January 2024.

Data analysis

The data analysis for this study was carried out using content analysis, an approach to distill and articulate the main ideas, themes, and messages from the collected written data (see Cohen et al., 2011). The analysis was performed in Chinese by the first author, a native speaker, to ensure precision and minimize the risk of losing or distorting data. The other two authors, not fluent in Chinese, provided oversight on the findings to ensure rigor and validity. The content analysis in this study followed the procedure outlined by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), Erlingsson and Brysiewicz (2017), and Kuckartz and Rädiker (2023), starting with familiarizing with the data and dividing the text into meaningful segments related to the research questions. Subsequent steps involved coding the textual material and developing categories using ATLAS.ti software. In the coding process, several codes were identified. Examples of codes included the effectiveness of SA, benefits of SA for teachers, benefits of SA for students, frequency of SA

Table 1. Response rates to questionnaire items.

Questionnaire item description	Number of responses (N = 97)	Response rate (%)
Effectiveness of SA	93	95%
Benefits of SA for teachers	83	85%
Benefits of SA for students	84	86%
Frequency of SA use	76	78%
Timing of SA use	68	70%
SA methods and strategies	74	76%
Challenges encountered	69	71%
Factors influencing SA implementation	70	72%

use, timing of SA use, SA methods and strategies, and influencing factors. From these codes, broader categories emerged, such as teacher perceptions of SA, the use of SA, and factors influencing SA implementation. Upon processing half of the data, a thorough review of codes and categories was undertaken to assess their reliability, with ongoing adjustments made to ensure consistent coding and categorization throughout the analysis. A final review of all codes and categorizations was conducted to verify reliability before summarizing and interpreting the results. The first author translated the essential quotes from the transcripts into English to report the results. Quotations are identified using numeric numbering (e.g. 1, 2, 3) for ease of reference and clarity in the subsequent reporting of results.

Results

Teacher perceptions of self-assessment

Effectiveness of self-assessment

Various perspectives were reflected in the attitudes of Chinese primary EFL teachers regarding the effectiveness of SA, with a clear majority expressing positive views. Among the 93 responses received, 73 teachers expressed a positive view on integrating SA into primary school EFL teaching. They attributed this to the various benefits of SA in promoting student learning. They emphasized that SA provides students with a deeper understanding of the learning process, enabling them to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. This, in turn, facilitates revision and reinforcement of language knowledge. Teachers appreciated how SA encourages students to monitor their progression actively and adjust learning approaches accordingly. As teachers put it, (1) 'Student self-assessment fosters an understanding of their own learning, thereby promoting the adjustment of learning strategies and enhancing overall learning effectiveness' (Teacher 44), and (2) 'Students can have a clear understanding of their level of mastery in school and can check for gaps in time' (Teacher 64). They also noted that it significantly boosts student motivation, promotes more profound self-reflection, and ultimately leads to better learning outcomes and increased self-awareness.

The responses also revealed more reserved attitudes, with 20 teachers sharing neutral views on the effectiveness of SA. This group remained cautious and primarily expressed concerns about the accuracy and reliability of student-led assessments. These teachers contended that students, particularly at younger or lower grade levels, may not have the maturity and evaluative skills necessary for trustworthy self-assessments. They pointed out challenges such as students' inability to assess themselves objectively and comprehensively and a tendency for students to rely heavily on teachers' evaluations instead. As teachers detailed, (3) 'There are differences among students here. Those with a strong ability can conduct SA objectively and gain from it, students with a weaker ability struggle more with this task' (Teacher 1), and (4) 'Students rely more on teacher evaluations' (Teacher 30).

Benefits of self-assessment

To further understand teachers' perspectives on SA, they were asked about both the perceived benefits of SA and the challenges encountered during its implementation. In this section, only the results of the benefits will be presented, as the challenges identified by the participants correspond closely to the factors influencing their SA implementation. The challenges will be integrated and explained in Factors influencing self-assessment implementation for a more thorough examination.

Benefits of self-assessment for students. The benefits identified for students fell into four key areas: 1) personal and emotional growth, 2) development of cognitive and metacognitive skills, 3) enhancement of learning and academic skills, and 4) improvement of social and interactive skills.

Firstly, there was a consensus on the positive impact of SA on personal and emotional growth. Teachers shared that SA helps students develop resilience to face setbacks, increases their interest and motivation in learning, and raises self-awareness by enabling them to recognize their areas of strength and growth. Teachers elaborated on their answers as (5) '(It allows students to) understand their strengths and weaknesses' (Teacher 25), and (6) 'Stimulating students' interest in learning and improving

children's resilience' (Teacher 67). Teachers also reported that the SA process facilitates the realization of students' self-development and self-value.

Secondly, SA was recognized for improving cognitive and metacognitive skills. According to the teachers, SA motivates students to establish goals, plan their learning, and cultivate critical thinking and problem-solving skills. In their responses, teachers explained, (7) 'Based on a more accurate understanding of their learning, they can develop effective strategies' (Teacher 56), (8) '(It) improves (their) ability to identify and solve problems' (Teacher 74), and (9) '(It helps) remind and affirm their short-term goals' (Teacher 97).

Thirdly, the findings highlighted the contribution of SA to improving learning and academic skills. Teachers indicated that SA improves students' learning skills and supports lifelong learning by giving students ownership and responsibility over their language learning. In addition, SA facilitates self-regulated learning, which enables students to monitor and adjust their learning strategies as needed. Teachers replied, (10) 'Students become the owners of their learning, highlighting student subjectivity and facilitating the improvement of learning initiative' (Teacher 47), and (11) 'Appropriate and relevant self-assessment can help children identify themselves and adjust their learning styles and methods' (Teacher 41).

Fourthly, teachers pointed out the benefits of SA in developing students' social and interactive skills. Teachers observed that SA cultivates cooperative skills and proactivity among students, enabling them to work effectively in groups and take initiative in their learning.

Benefits of self-assessment for teachers. When exploring teachers' views of SA benefits for themselves, these advantages were organized into five dimensions: 1) individualized instruction, 2) enhanced assessment practices, 3) improved teaching quality and professional development, 4) better classroom management, and 5) decreased workload and stress.

The first benefit teachers identified was that it supports individualized instruction by giving teachers insight into students' difficulties in the learning process. They clarified that this realization enables them to modify their instruction to fit each student's needs and supports students in creating personalized learning plans. In addition to this, they mentioned that SA provides them with a thorough understanding of students' self-perceived language learning and abilities so that they can provide more focused and effective feedback. The justifications given by teachers were, (12) '(It helps) understand students' learning needs' (Teacher 88), (13) '(It) facilitates the teacher to understand the difficulties students have in their learning process' (Teacher 19), (14) 'It helps teachers get to know their students better and supports them in developing personalized learning plans' (Teacher 46), and (15) 'It helps teachers to understand the student's learning and facilitates teacher's feedback' (Teacher 83).

The second benefit reported was that the integration of SA is likely to enhance assessment practices. Teachers mentioned that SA enables a shift from traditional, single-focus teacher evaluations to more student-centered assessments, highlighting students' central role in their learning process. It is also recognized that integrating SA into EFL teaching potentially improves the overall assessment quality. Teachers cited the following reasons, (16) 'For teachers, it can change the traditional one-dimensional teacher evaluation. Integrating student self-assessment is more conducive to the students as the subject of learning brings out their subjective initiative' (Teacher 1), and (17) '(It) improves the quality of assessment' (Teacher 54).

The third benefit mentioned was that SA supports improving teaching quality and professional development. Teachers believe that the outcomes of SA give them insight into how well their plans and tactics are working. It also encourages teachers to reflect on their teaching methods and make needed changes, which improves their professional growth and the quality of their teaching. Among the rationales given by teachers were, (18) 'It can provide teachers with feedback on teaching to help reflect and make decisions about teaching' (Teacher 67), (19) 'Improving teachers' teaching skills' (Teacher 10), and (20) 'It provides feedback on instructional design to optimize lessons' (Teacher 91).

The fourth perceived benefit was that SA helps teachers better manage the classroom by allowing them to use classroom time efficiently, thus achieving teaching goals effectively. This was supported by statements such as (21) '(It) saves time' (Teacher 6), (22) '(It) helps teachers to achieve teaching goals effectively' (Teacher 24), and (23) '(It) improves teaching efficiency' (Teacher 3).

Finally, teachers reported that SA can lead to a decrease in their workload and stress. From the teacher's point of view, it helps them relieve some of the burdens of teaching and assessment by involving students more directly and actively in the learning process. The reasons they gave include, (24) 'It promotes students' ability to learn on their own and reduces to some extent the educational burden on teachers' (Teacher 74), and (25) 'If students have stronger independent learning skills, it will also make teaching easier and more efficient' (Teacher 44).

The use of self-assessment

Teachers' practice of self-assessment: frequency and timing

In exploring teachers' SA practices in the classroom, teachers were asked how often and at what points in the teaching process they use SA. Among the 76 responses received, a minority of three teachers revealed that they do not use SA in their teaching practices. In contrast, the rest of the respondents have incorporated SA into their teaching to varying degrees of frequency. Notably, 11 teachers indicated that they use SA frequently. On the other hand, 15 teachers claimed that they rarely use SA in their classes. The majority, 47 teachers, noted that they use SA in their teaching but not consistently or frequently. When asked at what points they use SA in their teaching, the most commonly mentioned (40 out of 68) was on a unit basis, where SA is applied at the start or conclusion of each unit. Fewer teachers (15 of 68) described that they apply SA at different points in a lesson, either at the beginning, during, or at the end. Nearly the same number of teachers (13 from 68) considered using SA period-based. These teachers were more likely to use SA on a period-based schedule, such as after every two units, at mid-term checkpoints, or at the end of the academic semester.

Teachers' practice of self-assessment: methods and strategies

In response to the question about the methods and strategies employed by teachers in their classrooms, the findings were organized into four categories based on the teachers' responses. These categories were as follows: assessment tools and formats, reflective and analytical activities, collaborative and interactive activities, and motivational strategies.

Assessment tools and formats. Some teachers reported using varied assessment tools and formats, including checklists, task sheets, questionnaires, and rubrics-based self-assessments. One of the teachers shared:

> (26) (I) create a homework checklist that outlines the various tasks from the lesson, and for each task, I develop distinct SA forms, like ticking boxes or assigning stars. (I) then ask students to assess their performance on these tasks (Teacher 45).

Another teacher remarked, (27) '(I) create a task sheet for students to create a storybook related to the unit's theme. This task sheet also has criteria for them to assess their own performance' (Teacher 35).

Reflective and analytical activities. Some other teachers mentioned including reflective and analytical activities in their classroom practices, such as goal-setting exercises, mind maps, oral presentations, role-play reflections, portfolios, and writing tasks. A teacher explained:

> (28) (I have my students) establish goals for periodic testing, and after a specified period, they assess whether they've achieved their objectives. If (they) have, they get a reward. If (they) haven't, (they) write the reasons (Teacher 29).

Other teachers commented, (29) 'During oral presentations, students self-assess their preparation, the accuracy of their language use, and presentational skills' (Teacher 2), and (30) '(I have my students) document their progress and reflections in portfolios' (Teacher 66).

Collaborative and interactive activities. The third category includes collaborative and interactive activities where teachers integrate SA with peer assessment in collaborative tasks or use interactive digital platforms for SA. Teacher 91's comments illustrated this, (31) '(I) set up study groups, and they evaluate

each other's performance'. Teacher 46 remarked, (32) '(I use) the interactive classroom platform to give students quantitative scores, and then students self-assess based on the scores given'.

Motivational strategies. The last category refers to motivational strategies to promote a positive attitude towards SA among students, with teachers using incentives for individual and group tasks. For example, a stamp collection system is used by a teacher who rewards students when they achieve a goal and acknowledges their progress and accomplishments. Another teacher employs group competitions, inviting actively participating students to add stickers to their group's chart to recognize their contributions and good class performance.

Factors influencing self-assessment implementation

The third research question explores the factors that teachers perceive as influencing the implementation of SA in their teaching practices. Derived from the results, these factors were grouped into five main categories, with each category ordered based on the frequency of how often it was mentioned: 1) student-related factors, 2) educational context-related factors, 3) assessment criteria-related factors, 4) teacher-related factors, and 5) social-cultural factors.

Student-related factors

Factors related to students, such as age, ability, motivation, and attitude, significantly impact teachers' implementation of SA. Younger students or those with less developed evaluative skills were perceived to struggle with SA tasks and making accurate self-assessments. Teachers remarked, (33) 'Younger students appear to lack the capacity for self-assessment, either viewing things superficially or considering the teacher's assessment as authoritative' (Teacher 69) and (34) 'Students in lower grades are not able to accurately identify their weaknesses' (Teacher 26). Moreover, student's motivation and attitude towards SA, which vary widely, were assumed to directly impact their willingness to engage with and benefit from the process. This was justified as follows, (35) 'Students do not value self-assessment' (Teacher 3), (36) 'Some students are not cooperative' (Teacher 84), and (37) 'Students' motivation to learn' (Teacher 31).

Educational context-related factors

Teachers identified that one of the primary factors influencing their SA implementation was related to the educational context in which they work. These include large class sizes, a dominant exam-oriented culture, and a busy teaching schedule. Teachers felt these conditions often left limited room for the integration of SA into the curriculum, as their focus is predominantly on covering the syllabus and preparing students for standardized tests. Teacher 1 pointed out, (38) 'The existing school evaluation system does not motivate students to engage in self-assessment, nor does it highlight the significance and role of student self-assessment'. Time limitations were a common concern among teachers, with one noting:

> (39) There are only two lessons for lower grades per week, yet they are required to take final exams, resulting in insufficient class time. This leads to a scarcity of opportunities to implement self-assessment, as I need to keep pace with the teaching schedule (Teacher 60).

Assessment criteria-related factors

The absence of clear criteria for SA emerged as another crucial factor. Teachers pointed out that without well-defined criteria or standards, they and their students face difficulties in engaging with SA meaningfully and effectively. This was underlined by the observation of Teacher 42, (40) 'Some of the students find it difficult to understand the items. So there's a need for quantified and more precise assessment criteria'. Teacher 46 reinforced this point by stating, (41) 'Designing and establishing evaluation criteria is challenging for me'.

Teacher-related factors

The implementation of SA was also impacted by several issues related to teachers. Among these were insufficient skills and knowledge regarding how to guide students through the SA process, ensure their completion of SA tasks, and provide subjective, effective feedback. Additionally, the scarcity of continuous training opportunities was claimed to leave teachers ill-equipped to address these challenges. This was supported by the following statements, (42) 'Teachers require professional learning' (Teacher 35), (43) 'Students struggle to grasp what teachers expect of them, possibly due to the challenge teachers face in providing clear instructions' (Teacher 35), and (44) 'There is a lack of adequate dissemination of relevant knowledge and teachers' insufficient professional guidance for the students' (Teacher 40). Teacher attitudes towards SA, such as viewing it as a mere formality or doubting its effectiveness, further complicate its adoption.

Social-cultural factors

The final perceived factor influencing SA implementation was the social and cultural setting within which education occurs. Parental support and collaboration were identified as essential yet not always readily available. Some teachers noted that parents show little interest in the feedback. In addition, a cultural reluctance among students to share openly, driven by fear of embarrassment or 'losing face,' was also believed to hinder honest reflection. This was described by Teacher 5, (45) 'Because of concerns about 'saving face,' students may feel embarrassed to admit their inability'.

Discussion

How is self-assessment perceived?

The first research question attempted to understand teachers' perceptions of SA in primary school EFL teaching. The results reveal that all teachers recognized the benefits of implementing SA for both teachers and students. Teachers have observed numerous benefits of SA for students. Of these benefits, encouraging self-regulated learning, promoting motivation, and raising self-awareness emerged as the most commonly cited benefits. This aligns well with existing research that underscores the SA's impact on student self-regulated learning (Kumar et al., 2023; Mäkipää & Salo, 2023), motivation (McMillan & Hearn, 2008; Yan et al., 2020) and self-awareness (Andrade & Brown, 2016; Saribeyli, 2018). Teachers also identified significant benefits of SA for themselves, noting its role in enabling personalized instruction, enhancing assessment practices, improving teaching quality and professional growth, assisting in classroom management, and lessening their workload. When contrasting these benefits with earlier studies, it becomes clear that the positive outcomes of SA for teachers are well-documented in the academic field (Gardner, 2000; Phuong et al., 2023; Sadler & Good, 2006). Significantly, previous research has shown that improvement in teaching quality was particularly recognized by Chinese EFL teachers, who valued SA for offering insights into their teaching effectiveness. It was seen as a resource that allowed them to adjust their teaching strategies and methods (Brown & Gao, 2015; Zhang et al., 2022). Although no research directly links using student SA to teachers' professional growth, it is implied that SA offers feedback for teachers' self-reflection and assessment. This concept aligns with literature suggesting that such reflective practices can foster teachers' professional development (Ivaniuk et al., 2020). Given its correlation with the perceived benefits of improving teaching quality, this finding might reflect a perspective more common among Chinese EFL teachers and warrants further comparative studies across different countries.

Despite that teachers concurred on SA's benefits, their opinions on the effectiveness of SA varied considerably. The results reveal a predominantly positive view among teachers. A significant majority supported SA for its perceived benefits for students. This confirmation aligns with prior studies that highlight the generally positive attitudes of teachers toward SA across various educational contexts (Mäkipää et al., 2023; Shing & Fai, 2007; Zhang et al., 2022). However, the study also uncovers a layer of complexity in teachers' attitudes toward the effectiveness of SA. There was a minority of teachers who held neutral perspectives, primarily troubled by the accuracy of SA, especially considering the students' young age and varying abilities. These concerns are intensified by unclear evaluation criteria and

standards and students' heavy reliance on teacher assessments. Previous research has also recognized a neutral view on the effectiveness of SA attributed to the identified concerns and challenges (Bullock, 2011; Butler & Lee, 2010). Shing and Fai (2007) also documented this contentious perspective among teachers in mainland China, attributing it potentially to the excessive focus on examinations.

When exploring the first research question regarding teachers' perspectives on SA, the results reveal widespread agreement on SA's benefits for teachers and students. Although numerous teachers acknowledge SA's value, concerns about its application, particularly in assessing young learners accurately, present significant challenges and contribute to varied attitudes toward SA implementation. Previous research suggests teachers' perceptions and attitudes can impact their assessment practices (Brown & Gao, 2015; Takele & Melese, 2022). Therefore, this study underscores the imperative to raise teachers' awareness of SA's significance and role in primary-level EFL teaching.

How is self-assessment implemented?

The second research question investigated practices surrounding teachers' use of SA, focusing on how often they use it, when they use it during the teaching process, and the specific SA methods or strategies they adopt. The results show that while only a few teachers do not use SA in their teaching, the majority do, but with varying frequency, ranging from regular to irregular and rare, with less frequent use being more common. This distribution mirrors the existing studies, where infrequent use predominates, suggesting that SA has not yet fully become an integral part of regular assessment practice in primary schools (Guo & Xu, 2021; Wu et al., 2021; Young & Jackman, 2014). The results further indicate that most teachers favor conducting SA after each learning unit, aiming to assess students' comprehension of the knowledge and skills pertinent to that unit. This echoes with earlier research by Harris (1997). While Harris (1997) supports integrating SA continuously in learning for ongoing student reflection and evaluation, it's unknown if teachers encourage students to compare their assessment outcomes over various units, as this study didn't specifically explore such practices. Therefore, to what degree students are prompted to reflect on their learning progress remains undetermined. While teachers didn't explicitly state why they seldom or never use SA, their hesitancy is probably linked to various challenges encountered, including the ages, attitudes, and skill levels of students, the design of assessment tools, time constraints, and their beliefs. This implies the need for more in-depth research on this topic.

When looking at the specific SA methods and strategies teachers use in their classrooms, the results show a variety of approaches. The most frequently mentioned activities, such as checklists, task sheets, and oral and written tasks, match Harris and Brown's (2013) overview of typical strategies like 'self-ratings' and 'self-estimates of performance' (p. 369). This involves students assessing the quantitative and qualitative dimensions of what they do and how they perform (Harris & Brown, 2013, p. 369). Although not commonly mentioned by the teachers surveyed, role play is identified as a beneficial assessment tool in Courtney's (2019) study. Integrating SA with peer assessment is also validated in earlier research (Heritage, 2013; To & Panadero, 2019). Despite teachers employing diverse methods, they typically use SA as a tool for measurement rather than a learning tool. It has been argued by Butler (2023) that the actual value of SA comes from its use as a learning tool. Andrade and Brown's (2016) study on students' views of SA has also revealed a preference for using SA as a learning tool rather than just assessing outcomes. Their research clarifies that using SA primarily as a means of measurement offers limited opportunities for improvement upon perceived shortcomings. Therefore, it can be concluded that teachers still require awareness of using SA beyond simply measuring students' work and performance. With this in mind, teachers can also be introduced to different tools and methods for using SA as a learning tool. For example, research has underscored that the European Language Portfolio is a valuable and motivating tool for primary school students to support their language learning. It encourages goal setting, progress monitoring, reflection on learning, and self-assessment of language skills (Kohonen, 2020; Little, 2011). Also, the storyline approach, which links closely to real-life scenarios and is effective for SA in primary students, helps apply SA to real-world skills and knowledge (Ahlquist, 2019).

The investigation into the second research question, which examines how teachers implement SA, indicates that current SA practices in primary schools are characterized by irregular and inconsistent usage, not maximizing the potential benefits SA offers. There is a clear need for a change in mindset

toward a more integrated and consistent application of SA. This also suggests a need for teachers to increase their awareness of using SA as a tool for learning and to refine SA strategies for better supporting students' EFL learning. At the school level, in-service training opportunities should be provided to expand teachers' repertoire of effective SA strategies for primary students.

What factors influence teachers' self-assessment implementation?

The third research question looked at the factors influencing teachers' implementation of SA. The findings illuminate various factors, particularly those related to students, such as age, learning ability, and motivation. These factors are supported by existing literature, which suggests they may lead to inaccuracy in SA (Jackson, 2014; Lew et al., 2010; Ross et al., 2002). However, a notable controversy in the literature is that young learners can perform SA accurately under specific conditions, including proper guidance and support (Hung et al., 2016), tasks relevant to the context (Butler & Lee, 2006), effective feedback (Cowie & Harrison, 2016), regular SA practice (Butler & Lee, 2010), and training on how to conduct SA (Black et al., 2004; McDonald & Boud, 2003). Butler et al.'s (2021) study involving 20 Chinese primary school students in Nanjing confirms their assessment literacy at a certain level, revealing they could express preferences for assessment tasks that are process-oriented, language-use-focused, and communication-based. Despite these factors, it can be concluded that young learners can effectively engage in SA through regular practice, appropriate SA tasks, and adequate teacher guidance.

The results also highlight a significant concern among teachers regarding the need for clear and specific assessment criteria. This issue has two main aspects: students frequently find it hard to comprehend the items, and teachers face challenges in effectively creating these criteria. In this regard, the literature also presents contrasting views: some identify unclear assessment criteria as a common challenge in SA implementation (Mannion, 2022; Ross, 2006), while others suggest that creating assessment items aligned with learning content (Heritage, 2013), student experiences (Suzuki, 2015), or familiar tasks (Fitzgerald et al., 2003) could mitigate this issue. Involving students in developing assessment criteria and constructing items is another strategy highlighted in the literature as a potential solution (Gan & Lam, 2020; Patekar, 2021; Wang, 2017). Nonetheless, for these strategies to be effective, teachers require the necessary knowledge and skills to design and guide students to actively and meaningfully engage in this process.

Differing opinions on student and assessment criteria-related factors could stem from teachers' preconceived ideas or a lack of knowledge and skills in SA practices. This draws attention to another vital factor discussed: the deficiency in teachers' professional expertise and a scarcity of training opportunities in this field. The lack of knowledge and skills related to SA among teachers has been documented by numerous studies, particularly in the Chinese educational context (Wu et al., 2021; Yan et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2022). In the current study, 76% of teachers indicated they had never received any training on SA, whereas only 24% reported having undergone such training. Similarly, in a survey by Gan and Lam (2020), nearly half of the 68 Chinese university EFL teachers reported not having received training on using SA, and almost 91% expressed a need for training in this area. It's also been suggested in other educational settings that teachers should be supported and trained to guide and support students in conducting SA (Kiely, 2018; Patekar, 2021; Tsagari et al., 2023). This underscores the pressing need for improved in-service teacher training to support teachers' preparation and implementation of SA.

The results also discuss the factors regarding educational context, including class size, teaching schedules, and the prevalent exam-oriented culture. Large class sizes, a commonly cited issue in implementing educational reforms in China, have been noted in previous research as a challenge to adopting SA practices (Liu & Xu, 2017; Yan et al., 2021). The constrained teaching schedules, reflective of a broader systemic issue, have also been acknowledged in the literature (Brown & Gao, 2015; Gan & Lam, 2020). The exam-oriented evaluation culture, a characteristic not only of China but also prevalent in other Asian countries, poses challenges (Butler & Lee, 2006; Liu & Xu, 2017; Wong, 2017). To tackle these challenges, strategies might involve co-teaching (Kulkarni & Sivaraman, 2022) and focus group assessments (Golzar et al., 2022) for large classes, using available resources like SA checklists found in textbooks, or integrating SA into regular assignments that don't add extra time. Yet, at its core, the responsibility to enact

reforms to decrease class sizes and alleviate the pressure of high-stakes exams ultimately falls on administrators and policymakers.

Turning to socio-cultural factors, the need for parental support and overcoming students' reluctance to engage openly in SA due to fear of embarrassment have been identified as pivotal. Butler (2023) emphasizes that effective SA implementation involves parental involvement and a broader social context shaped by their expectations. It can be concluded that implementing SA successfully also requires raising parental awareness and creating a trusting and supportive learning environment (Andrade & Brown, 2016; Butler, 2023; Cowie & Harrison, 2016; Sutton, 2010).

Responding to the third research question about what influences teachers' implementation of SA, we found several factors. Addressing these factors is essential for implementing SA effectively into primary EFL teaching in China. To overcome such challenges, action is needed at three levels. Firstly, teachers need to understand the factors affecting their SA practices and the support they need for its implementation. Secondly, schools should promote the integration of SA into regular assessments and provide tailored in-service training for teachers. Such training could range from introducing SA to newcomers, focusing on its value, methods of adoption, and classroom application, to helping experienced teachers explore advanced SA strategies and improve student guidance and feedback. Lastly, it is recommended that policymakers and curriculum designers increase focus on SA within assessment practices and include a variety of SA activities in the curriculum materials and textbooks (Allal, 2010; Brown & Harris, 2013).

Conclusion

This study sought to understand primary EFL teachers' perspectives and practices of SA in the Chinese educational context, particularly in Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Jiangsu. The results indicate that most teachers hold a favorable view regarding the effectiveness of SA and acknowledge its benefits for both students and themselves. Despite the favorable perspectives, the results indicate that numerous teachers do not routinely integrate SA into their teaching practice. The infrequent use of SA is likely to be influenced by the factors identified by teachers. The study also demonstrates that while teachers apply SA in diverse ways and at distinct points in their teaching, they predominantly recommend its function as a measuring tool. This suggests a need to raise teachers' awareness of SA as a learning tool and to introduce strategies for using it, as students benefit significantly from engaging with SA in this way. The disparity in teachers' perspectives and practice indicates that there remains scope for development in the SA implementation within the Chinese primary school EFL classroom. However, this gap may stem from various factors as reported, including those related to students, assessment criteria, teachers, educational context, and socio-cultural aspects. Therefore, promoting effective SA practice requires a threefold effort: first, teachers should have a better understanding of their own perceptions, practices, and needed support about SA implementation; second, school administrators need to foster an environment conducive to SA use and provide targeted in-service training tailored to teachers' needs at different stages of SA application; and third, policymakers and curriculum developers could enhance the emphasis on SA within the curriculum and integrate a range of SA formats and tools into curriculum materials and textbooks.

Several theoretical and practical contributions to EFL teaching at the primary level can be drawn from the results of this study. In terms of theoretical implications, this study adds to the relatively sparse research on SA in primary school EFL teaching both in the Chinese and international contexts. In addition, existing research on SA in Chinese primary schools tends to be theoretical or empirical, with relatively limited sample sizes. Therefore, this study adds to the literature by providing a broader range of teachers' views and more substantial evidence for understanding teachers' perspectives on SA. With respect to practical implications, this study first underscores that SA should be integrated into regular assessment practices in EFL teaching at the primary school level. The study also proposes practical strategies for teachers to alleviate the factors that may hinder their implementation of SA. In addition, the study sheds light on the current state of SA practice in Chinese primary school EFL classrooms. This offers insights to policymakers and school administrators for the continuous improvement of teacher education and in-service training programs. In particular, the study informs curriculum designers about

the importance of integrating innovative SA tools and methods into curricula and textbooks, ensuring that these tools are readily available and effectively applied in the classroom. Lastly, the current study is part of a broader project, and its results will inform our next steps toward presenting Chinese primary school EFL teachers with a new pedagogical tool for SA to address the challenges encountered in using SA.

Despite the contributions, we realize the limitations of the present study. Although our sample size is large enough to support the findings, it cannot be generalized across all contexts, as it investigates specifically teachers' perspectives within Shanghai, Shenzhen, and Jiangsu. Other regions and cities within China were not included in the investigation, limiting the broader applicability of the results. For this reason, our advice for future studies is to either increase the sample size or examine teachers' views from other parts of China. While this study focuses exclusively on teachers' perspectives, previous research indicates that students' views may diverge from those of teachers (Golzar et al., 2022; Mäkipää, 2021). Therefore, we suggest that future research could consider students' perspectives and compare them with the findings of this study. Moreover, this study only reveals teachers' practice of SA in terms of frequency, timing, and SA methods. It does not reveal whether teachers instruct students in SA skills and how they provide feedback, two essential components of successful SA implementation. Therefore, future research is encouraged to delve into these critical areas.

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Data availability statement

A preliminary version of this research was presented at the Exploring Language Education Conference. The findings have been expanded and refined for this submission.

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