A Tale of Three Excellent Chinese EFL Teachers: Unpacking Teacher Professional Qualities for Their Sustainable Career Trajectories from an Ecological Perspective

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Abstract: Teachers’ quality has long been researched in the field of general education. However, little attention has been paid to the professional qualities of excellent English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers in the context of English curriculum reform, especially from an ecological perspective. To address this gap, this study adopted a qualitative approach to characterise the qualities of excellent senior high school EFL teachers in China and the development of their professional qualities using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model. Four interconnected dimensions of excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities were confirmed: English language pedagogical content competence, beliefs about the foreign language teaching profession and professional ethics, beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning, and beliefs about language teacher learning and development. Meanwhile, the EFL teachers constructed and developed their professional qualities in their dynamic interaction with the complex ecological systems where they lived. The paper considers these various teacher-related factors in the ecological systems and provides some suggestions for sustaining EFL teachers’ professional development.

Keywords: excellent EFL teacher; professional qualities; ecological perspective; teacher education

1. Introduction

Waves of English language education reform in China have created new challenges for teachers [1,2], calling for more excellent English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers [3–5]. These excellent teachers play leading roles in a school’s EFL teaching and the construction of the overall development of the EFL teaching community [6]. However, there has been limited exploration of the professional qualities of EFL teachers [6–11], which would benefit their agentic response to the challenges and opportunities [6,7], guiding them to survive and thrive in complex educational contexts [4]. The complexity of teachers’ living and working contexts enables them to form and change their teaching beliefs [12], construct their pedagogical competence, and enhance their teaching skills [11]. Their beliefs, competencies, and skills, which comprise their EFL qualities [5,13], must be further examined from more social and ecological perspectives [6], given the ecological turn in teacher education [14], to draw a dynamic and comprehensive picture of teachers’ professional qualities. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model offers a resource to work out such a picture.

In the past two decades, with the ecological turn in language teacher education [14–19], some ecological theories, such as affordance [20,21], niche [20,22], and ecological systems theories/models [23], have received considerable attention in teacher education research in China. Amongst them, Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory, which focuses on the interconnection and dynamic interaction between individuals and the environment and divides the environment into different ecological subsystems [23], is more widely
used. This theory provides a useful theoretical framework for studying the contexts in which teachers exist and develop; thus, it has been used frequently in research on language teacher psychology and practice, such as resilience [24], well-being [18], and action research [25]. Against this backdrop, teachers’ professional qualities, as an important topic in teacher education and development research, should shift from the previous consideration of teacher cognition and teacher knowledge to an ecological perspective to comprehensively understand the formation and development of teachers’ professional qualities. Meanwhile, language teachers, as active agents in social and educational contexts, directly and indirectly experience their professional qualities as being naturally shaped by the environment in which they live. This fact supports the utilisation of Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model to delve into the features of teachers’ professional qualities and the quality of those constructions. Such an attempt is conducive for analysing the complex interplay between teachers and the environment in which they live as well as the role of contextual factors in shaping teachers’ qualities. Prior research viewing teacher education and development through the ecological lens [18,24–26] has strongly indicated that teachers’ legitimate involvement in educational events is an interactive and dynamic process. Therefore, the current study adopted a qualitative approach to characterise the qualities of excellent senior high school EFL teachers in China and the development of their professional qualities using Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model. Further, exploring the issue of teacher education by analysing their career trajectories would, in turn, help English language teachers in similar EFL contexts understand their career development for career sustainability and job well-being.

2. Literature Review

2.1. EFL Teacher Professional Quality

Teacher qualities have been defined as all teacher-related characteristics that bring about favourable educational outcomes [15]. This multidimensional construct involves knowledge, skills, attitudes or beliefs, behaviours, and personal dispositions that promote teachers to work productively and successfully [5,11]. Wu [5] proposed a four-dimensional framework to define university EFL teachers’ professional qualities. The first dimension concerns English language pedagogical content competence, which emphasises EFL teachers’ strong command of English subject knowledge and teaching skills. The second dimension relates to beliefs about the foreign language teaching profession and professional ethics, focusing on teachers’ opinions of and attitudes towards their profession as well as their moral character. The third dimension encompasses beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning, referring to teachers’ beliefs and cognition about students, foreign language, and the teaching profession. The last dimension incorporates beliefs about language teacher learning and development, focusing on how teachers improve and develop themselves in language teaching. For the purposes of this study, EFL teacher professional quality is defined as the teacher-related features that make English language teaching (ELT) successful in both teaching and professional development, including beliefs about teaching professional development and pedagogical content competence [5,11].

Research on teachers’ professional qualities has gained tremendous popularity within the field of teacher education; some scholars have explored the features of teachers’ professional qualities in an array of disciplines, such as mathematics [13,16], music [17], and physical education [18]. Of the limited research conducted on ELT, the literature on EFL teachers’ professional qualities has observed that expert EFL teachers were able to effectively integrate theoretical and practical knowledge and positively engage in critical reflection [5,6,10]. Excellent EFL teachers are able to assess and use prior experience. They display a great willingness to communicate with students and help them in their studies [7]. They are capable of planning, organising, and managing teaching (i.e., effective use of daily-life materials and body language, creation of an appropriate environment) [19]. The four dimensions of Wu’s [5] framework for excellent EFL university teachers in mainland China are found to dynamically interact and co-construct teacher qualities. EFL teachers’
teaching behaviours mirrored their pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) and competence and were simultaneously affected by their beliefs about teaching and learning and their professional ethics.

In sum, previous studies have revealed the distinctive features of excellent teachers but have rarely delved into how those features are formed and developed throughout the stages of their career. The ecological perspective emphasises the interaction and interconnection between teachers and the environment, offering significant insights to analyse the dynamic development of teachers’ professional qualities. The exploration of teachers’ professional qualities from the ecological view not only considers their personal and professional perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours but also the role of context and its interactive relationships with teachers. As an important ecological theory, Bronfenbrenner’s [20] ecological systems model is a timely addition to existing studies in the field and is given special attention in researching teacher education and development.

2.2. Ecological Perspective on Language Teacher Education

Bronfenbrenner’s [20] ecological systems model situates a developing person in nested ecological systems – namely, the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem, and chronosystem. Specifically, the microsystem is a pattern of activities, roles, and relationships experienced by the developing person in a specific face-to-face setting containing other selves, such as colleagues or students, with distinctive features of temperament, personality, and beliefs. The mesosystem focuses on linkages and processes between two or more settings with two or more microsystems, such as the relationship between school and family. The exosystem may also involve linkages and processes between two or more settings, but at least one setting does not usually include the developing person, with events taking place indirectly influencing the development of a person. For example, some decisions, such as educational policies, school requirements, and class division, are not made by teachers but would nonetheless influence their teaching practice. The macrosystem is a societal blueprint in a given culture, subculture, and other broader social contexts, such as a college entrance examination or beliefs about education (i.e., teachers’ role in imparting knowledge and educating people) [20]. The chronosystem focuses on changes in the person and environment triggered by life events or experiences [20]. The theory emphasises interaction, reciprocity, and synergy between the developing persons and environment [20].

Most researchers have analysed the influence of ecological elements situated in ecological systems on the development of language teachers. However, it is worth noting that not all of the subsystems have been utilised simultaneously in researching language teaching and learning. For example, Edwards [21] summarised the ecological impact of action research on English language teacher development focusing on the three subsystems of the ecological systems model – namely, the microsystem, mesosystem, and macrosystem. Some scholars applying Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model have adopted their own ecological circles to explore the dynamism and connection between teachers and environments. For example, Hofstadler et al. [22] analysed the dynamic complexity of content and language integrated learning (CLIL) and teachers’ subjective well-being, interwoven with various interrelated factors from a national context, institutional context, class context, and personal context, to analyse the ecological systems in which teachers operate. To sum up, previous studies have attested to the flexible use of the ecological systems model within the field of language teacher education, focusing on the multilevel and interrelated environments where teachers operate. They have also considered the reciprocal and dynamic interaction between teachers and contexts, rather than a one-way contextual effect upon teacher psychology and behaviour.

We believe that teacher qualities are situated in the settings where teachers positively interact with the surrounding environments. Teachers’ learning and teaching experiences and school contexts must be elucidated [6,10]. Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model is conducive to interpreting this interactive process and analysing the contextual influence...
on the construction and development of teacher quality systematically. Nevertheless, to date, scant attention has been paid to researching excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities from an ecological perspective. Therefore, inspired by Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems model, this study sought to examine excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities by addressing the following two research questions:

1. What are the professional qualities of excellent Chinese EFL teachers?
2. What are the factors influencing excellent Chinese EFL teachers’ professional qualities from the ecological systems perspective?

3. Methodology

3.1. Setting and Participants

The study was situated at a key senior high school in a small county in Northeast China. The school was well equipped with multimedia devices. In the past several years, many of the students had been admitted to the best colleges in China, such as Tsinghua University and Peking University. Therefore, this senior high school was rated as one of the excellent educational institutions by the local municipal commission of education.

Inspired by previous standards for excellent teachers [5], we determined three dimensions for choosing excellent EFL teachers in the Chinese educational context: no less than 15 years of teaching experience, because expertise is often associated with years of experience and practice [6,7]; senior professional title; and teaching and scientific research programmes or prizes awarded at the national or international level [5]. Veteran teachers are believed to possess wisdom and earn great respect because of their rich teaching experience [6]. No less than 15 years of teaching experience and a senior professional title are important criteria to evaluate expert teachers in China [23,24]. Several factors are used to evaluate a senior professional title, such as educational background, teaching and researching knowledge and abilities, and significant contributions to the teaching profession. Teachers who obtain a senior professional title are often considered outstanding. The third criterion is awards in scientific research and teaching competitions at the county, district, provincial, or national level [5]. For example, teachers successfully apply for educational programmes or win prizes in teaching skills competitions held by the local, regional, or national educational department. We adopted convenience and purposive sampling to collect data [25,26].

In our study, three excellent EFL teachers were selected from this senior high school. First, one of the authors of this paper was invited as an adjunct professor to help English teachers administer school-based projects, working with the school’s deputy head and coordinator of the English teaching team, which provided favourable conditions to identify excellent EFL teachers. A harmonious relationship between the researchers and the high school teachers made the selection of participants convenient and reliable. Ten EFL teachers at this senior high school have obtained a senior professional title, but only three of them satisfied the above requirements owing to their better performance in language teaching and researching. For example, they had won first prize in provincial teaching competitions, while the others had received prizes at comparatively lower levels. Additionally, students’ evaluations ranked these three EFL teachers’ performance at the top of the list. Ultimately, two female teachers (Teachers W and Y) and one male teacher (Teacher Z) fulfilled the criteria and volunteered to take part in this study. Specifically, Teacher W had obtained a college diploma and started teaching English in 1987. She was 53 years old at the time of this study and had more than 30 years of teaching experience. Teacher Y had received her English college diploma in 1999. She was 40 years old at the time of this study and had been teaching English for 19 years. Teacher Z had obtained his English college diploma in 1993. He was 46 years old at the time of this study and had been teaching in this senior high school for about 23 years (see Appendix A for profiles of the participants).

3.2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were employed to capture the participants’ professional experiences and qualities. The interviews followed an interview protocol (see Appendix D)
to avoid straying from the topic while giving participants flexibility for reflection [27]. The participants were informed of the research purposes before they voluntarily participated in the study, with anonymity and confidentiality maintained throughout. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were conducted from August 2018 to April 2021. The participants were encouraged to share their learning and teaching experiences and attitudes towards language teaching. Each interview was conducted in Putonghua, lasted for approximately an hour, and was audio-recorded with the participants’ permission. After the interview, recordings of the interviews were transcribed and checked by the participants.

3.3. Data Analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the data [25]. Specifically, an inductive approach was used during data analysis to highlight excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities. The textual data were stored in NVivo to facilitate the organisation and coding processes. First, with the research questions in mind, initial coding was conducted to categorise the data according to Wu’s [5] profile of excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities and Bronfenbrenner’s [20] ecological systems model. Next, given the emerging bottom-up themes, a second level of coding was performed after repetitive analysis and revision. Then an interpretative level of coding was conducted. Categories such as advocating interest-oriented teaching and encouraging differentiated instruction were determined on the basis of specific extracts but belong to the dimension “English language pedagogical content competence” (see Appendix B). Meanwhile, factors influencing the construction and development of excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities were analysed with the guidance of the aforementioned ecological systems model. For example, all the participants emphasised the role of mentors in their learning and teaching experiences, which was categorised into the microsystem, while the theme teacher training programme was categorised into the codes for the exosystem belonging to the ecological systems model (see Appendix C). The participants checked the transcripts to ensure transcription accuracy. We also read the transcribed textual data and discussed with participants whenever any uncertainty arose about the interpretation of particular extracts. All the identified codes were further compared and categorised into different themes. As a qualitative case study, we do not want to generalise our data. We do hope, however, that by providing rich descriptions of the three participants’ career trajectories, the findings may be transferable to other settings [28].

4. Findings

The participants’ learning and teaching experiences and attitudes towards ELT professions emerged from the data. Specifically, we analysed the qualities of three excellent senior high school EFL teachers and the main influencing factors in this study.

4.1. Case 1: The Story of Teacher W

After graduating from college in 1987, Teacher W began teaching English at this senior high school and, thus, has been teaching at the school for more than 30 years. Besides teaching English, she was a head teacher and leader of the English teaching team. In the teaching profession, she gained considerable support from other school leaders, colleagues, students, and family members, and she understood the importance of serving students. Such a stable and harmonious school context promoted her professional qualities.

4.1.1. Advocating Interest-Oriented and Differentiating Instruction, Expanding New Knowledge

Teacher W had strong teaching competence and encouraged interest-oriented language teaching. According to the characteristics of students in different grades, she organised teaching activities step by step and guided students to cooperate in group work. These cooperative activities cultivated students’ abilities and confidence in learning English.
Extract 1. I advocated an interest-oriented teaching approach while teaching newcomers to high school. In the second year, I taught half the content and my students taught the other half. In the third year, I guided them to learn to teach English. Their English abilities improved in this process, so they were very happy and confident.

Furthermore, she supplemented her foreign language teaching materials with online TED videos and shared outstanding students’ learning experiences. Such activities created a positive classroom atmosphere and inspired students to recognize cultural differences during the process of learning English.

Extract 2. I was the first to introduce New Concept English (a textbook) into this school in the 1990s. Then I instructed students to see some good lectures from TED and what excellent people looked like and what they gained by learning English.

Additionally, when looking back at Teacher W’s teaching trajectory, we found that demonstration classes played a crucial role in developing her foreign language teaching ability. The classes forced her to step out of her comfort zone but gave her opportunities to thrive.

Extract 3. In my early teaching years, the school leader asked young teachers to give demonstration classes. Every autumn, I was assigned to give some demonstration classes; a senior teacher told me that it was the best way to improve my teaching competence. Later, I always got the first prize and went to other places to give demonstration classes, which lasted for many years.

English language pedagogical content competence was found to be situated in the teaching environment and mainly affected by students’ developmental needs. It was further improved and expanded with external educational resources (i.e., textbooks and demonstration classes). Teacher W also emphasized the positive role of her university head teacher in improving her English teaching knowledge and abilities. In addition, a series of teacher training projects and activities further pushed the development of her teaching competence.

4.1.2. Imparting Knowledge and Educating People, Being Dedicated and Altruistic

After teaching English for more than 30 years, Teacher W still loved her profession. She always kept her professional commitment, showed great willingness to educate students, and hoped students would be admitted to their ideal university.

Extract 4. There were two major tasks in life: to give my ideas to others or to put others’ money into my pocket. I was not a businessperson, but I could pass on my ideas to others. I cultivated some children from poor families admitted into colleges, such as Tsinghua University and Peking University.

In addition, she expressed her opinions on teaching professional ethics and paid close attention to students’ interest in English learning. As she mentioned, a teacher should not only teach the linguistic skills of English, such as oral and written skills, but should also enhance students’ critical thinking abilities.

Extract 5. I recently realized that in the first 10 years, my work was to teach students knowledge, and in the second 10 years, my work was to cultivate their listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation abilities. In recent years, I found that I tended to develop their minds.

Teacher W also found pleasure in helping students and endeavored to be a good teacher. She was strict with students while simultaneously encouraging them. She also emphasized that excellent teaching results are pertinent to the strong dedication of English teachers.

Extract 6. Be dedicated. I thought successful teaching had a lot to do with this spirit. Some teachers were not good at demonstration classes, but they had good teaching results because of their tireless teaching, after-school tutoring, and accurate dictation corrections.
Upon delving into her learning experience, it was found that Teacher W’s spirits of dedication and commitment were shaped by the influence of English mentors who had encouraged her to go to university and make a contribution to the nation. Support from her parents was another important reason for her engagement in the teaching profession. Teacher W was an elementary school student in the 1970s, when Chinese compulsory education had not yet been implemented in this small undeveloped county. Her father thought it was pivotal to receive an education and motivated her to learn English. During her teaching career, she had cultivated many excellent students to contribute to the society. She also enjoyed the emotional reward and a meaningful life from language teaching, as evinced when she said, “Do something meaningful for my hometown”.

4.1.3. Centring Students, Advocating Effective Interaction, and Cultivating Students’ Minds

In language teaching, Teacher W experienced the transition from a traditional teaching model to cooperative learning. She emphasised the critical role of students in language classroom interaction and that she wanted to empower students with more freedom and autonomy in her class.

Extract 7. Some novice teachers might ask difficult questions beyond students’ language proficiency. I don’t think this is a good teaching strategy. My lessons aimed at serving my students.

Apart from considering students’ learning experiences, Teacher W was strict in class management and pushed students to prepare learning materials in advance by regularly checking their notes.

Extract 8. Classroom rules were critical. Supplementary teaching materials for class must be prepared well, including textbooks, dictionaries, and exercise books. I asked students to summarise language points as their language learning logs to submit to me after each class.

Preparing exam items for the education department revealed her powerful professional competence. She showed eagerness to choose some articles with positive energy for the test, with significant emphasis on cultivating students’ minds and the humanistic aspect of the English language.

Extract 9. In the exam I set for the provincial education department, there was an article about students’ complaints. I thought this was a common topic among students. It was necessary to guide students on how to deal with this matter. The end of the article enlightened people to look at the positive aspect. I liked this kind of article, which allowed students to do exercises and gain helpful life experiences.

Teacher W’s beliefs about language teaching (i.e., student-centred position and student–teacher dynamic interaction) could be traced to the effective feedback she had received from her mentor on a teaching training project, and she learnt how to interact with students in an exciting way: “I thought that I should let my students understand my lessons and give them the freedom to communicate”. Later, she served as a leader of an English teaching group and often led her colleagues to visit other schools to learn cutting-edge teaching ideas.

4.1.4. Pursuing Lifelong Learning and Innovative Scientific Research

Teaching is an evolving process of professional development [29]. Teacher W loved English and vigorously pursued her dream of a teaching career, and she displayed great courage to overcome the pressures caused by the unfavourable environment and shortage of resources. Although she had earned an advanced English diploma, she proactively engaged in school activities. For instance, she insisted on pursuing a teacher training programme regardless of objections from family members and a paucity of resources.

Extract 10. At that time, administrators from the county asked whether anyone wanted to go out for further study. I wanted to. However, my husband did not support me because my child was only
three years old and traffic was inconvenient [...] But I still insisted on participating in a training programme for half a year even when I would return home at ten o’clock at night during the training at weekends.

Teacher W was adept at seizing opportunities to sharpen herself, including visiting schools, applying for research projects, and engaging in teacher training.

**Extract 11.** My favourite thing was learning English, and the next was doing scientific research [...]. I guided our group to apply for research projects and often told the headmaster that X school was very good, and we wanted to study there. He gave us support with great pleasure.

Teacher W was proactive in teaching and scientific research and sought further learning. On one hand, it derived from her love for English and intrinsic motivation to consolidate their academic qualifications and teaching competence. On the other hand, the great encouragement given by school leaders and education departments in the forms of, for instance, time and financial support, stimulated the professional development of EFL teachers. Likewise, as emerged from the interview, other schools provided academic platforms and resources (i.e., curriculum design, teaching methods, and classroom management strategies) for Teacher W’s teammates to update their expertise and vision. Under the synergic effects of many favourable factors, Teacher W achieved good results in teaching and scientific research and was inspired to continuously develop her professional qualities.

4.2. Case 2: The Story of Teacher Y

Teacher Y received an English college diploma in 1999 and worked at another junior high school for nine years before moving to this senior high school in 2008. During her teaching, she had been appointed as a head teacher many times. She also won the honorary titles of the municipality’s excellent class teacher, teaching expert, and provincial backbone teacher.

4.2.1. Expanding New Knowledge and Encouraging Differentiating Instruction

Teacher Y had been teaching at this senior high school for more than 10 years and had unique insights into ELT. She often chose appropriate supplementary teaching materials to expand students’ knowledge according to the level of each class and led students to a more comprehensive understanding of English language knowledge.

**Extract 12.** In my first year here, I combined several teaching materials. For example, I instructed students to take good English newspapers and do all kinds of English tests. Some difficult language points from the test papers were only taught in high-level classes and not for low-level students.

In addition to selecting supplementary teaching materials, Teacher Y consciously adjusted the teaching contents and schedules according to the different class levels. While guiding students to grasp the main ideas of a passage, she also focused on the details to develop students’ reading skills.

**Extract 13.** Generally, we taught more knowledge in high-level classes. If not, we made it easier. Students first read the whole passage to find every topic sentence. Sometimes, we also cultivated students’ reading skills through analysing the first sentence of each paragraph, pictures, titles, etc.

Another point was to promote students’ self-confidence. When students asked a simple question about the difference between adjectives and possessive pronouns, although frustrated, Teacher Y did not show any negative emotions in front of the students. Instead, she carefully explained the difference to the students to instil confidence in them.

**Extract 14.** Various test items must be done in order to cultivate top students in high-level classes. But in other classes, I simplified teaching contents because their level of English is low, and it is necessary to build their confidence.
Teacher Y also talked about the pressure that school leaders and the education policy put on teachers. The evaluation of teachers’ performance was primarily based on students’ test scores, as Teacher Y explained.

**Extract 15.** *The school ranked a teacher by students’ grades. If a teacher was ranked the first this time and the second next time, our appraisal points would be deducted by school leaders. All teachers wanted to save face. If we did not work hard or were ranked at the bottom, the headmaster would talk to us.*

Teachers at this school were not only ranked in order of students’ grades but were required to cultivate outstanding students who might be admitted to first-tier universities. Those high requirements undoubtedly challenged but also inspired teachers’ motivation to improve their English language pedagogical content competence. Teacher Y’s teaching competence was also closely related to her understanding of textbook knowledge and students’ development needs.

### 4.2.2. Showing Love for English Teaching, Transmitting English Culture, and Being Dedicated

Teacher Y had taught English for many years because she loved English and was deeply influenced by her mentors at a young age. Additionally, she believed that compared to other subjects, learning English would enhance her intercultural awareness.

**Extract 16.** *All of my head teachers in high school taught English, which had a potential influence on me. I wanted to be an English teacher because I could obtain some cultural knowledge through learning and teaching English.*

Regarding her beliefs about the teaching profession, she emphasised that “teaching was a matter of conscientious and dedication”, and she must treat students fairly according to their dynamic needs. However, both time and energy were invested in classroom management and student learning, which quickly led to an imbalance between life and work.

**Extract 17.** *Teaching was a matter of conscience and dedication. When I was a head teacher, I had to get up at 6:00 am and finished work at 6:15 pm. When I arrived home, it might be close to 7:00 pm. After guiding my child to finish homework, I came back to school and stayed with my students until evening class was over.*

In this sense, Teacher Y expressed a contradictory situation in her job through her love and care for students on one hand and her family commitments on the other hand.

### 4.2.3. Fulfilling Teachers’ Leading Role and Cultivating Students’ Attitudes

Teacher Y also mentioned the necessity of cultivating students’ learning attitudes from teachers’ leading roles in maintaining classroom discipline. For example, she often monitored students’ learning attitudes and attention by checking their mastery of knowledge points. In this process, Teacher Y’s view of language teaching was deeply influenced by students’ attitudes towards English.

**Extract 18.** *Paying attention to students in class rather than showing yourself [...] Sometimes, students were asked to repeat what I had just said. The questions I asked in class were very simple. I would explain to them if they did not know. But if students were absent-minded, I had to monitor their learning process.*

### 4.2.4. Learning from Others and Positively Engaging in School Activities

Novice teachers received beneficial feedback from their mentors, who observed their teaching activities or classroom practice [6]. Before moving to this senior high school, Teacher Y taught at a junior high school for nine years. The current school leader arranged for another experienced teacher to be her mentor because of the differences in teaching content between junior and senior high schools. Although confronted with considerable
pressure from the outset, including raising her young child, working as a head teacher, and adapting to the new environment, she worked harder and carefully asked the mentor for advice.

**Extract 19.** I had a mentor and contacted her directly after I came to this school [...] I taught students one lesson after observing my mentor’s teaching process. I learned a lot under her guidance.

Teacher Y had had a strong motivation to learn English. After receiving her English college diploma, she took the adult college entrance examination to improve her abilities and continued her development in the future.

**Extract 20.** In 2000, I participated in the national higher education exam for self-taught adults and was admitted to X Normal University. Although my headmaster did not require me to do it, I thought that I was young and able to make more progress. It would be better to obtain a bachelor’s degree for a salary increase or job promotion in the future.

Teacher Y and her colleagues also participated in a series of activities to develop their teaching and management skills. Furthermore, the school provided enough funding for their professional development so that they had opportunities to learn some new teaching concepts. She also commented on the positive and vigorous school atmosphere.

**Extract 21.** We often participated in activities with the time and funding support from the school, such as teacher training, information exchange conferences. Our group leader led us to X Province for study [...] Two days ago, I was assigned to X City for head teacher training.

Teacher Y humbly sought advice and constantly improved her professional qualities. Making a professional transition from junior high school to senior high school meant that her knowledge needed to be enriched and expanded. Moreover, the motivation to obtain increase salaries and job promotions pushed Teacher Y to constantly develop herself.

### 4.3. Case 3: The Story of Teacher Z

Teacher Z obtained his English college diploma in 1993 and had been teaching English at this senior high school for over 23 years. During this period, he served as a head teacher, a grade director, and a teacher educator. He also took part in many teaching competitions and published some good academic articles. Due to his excellent performance in language teaching and researching, he became one of the youngest provincial senior teachers in 2009.

#### 4.3.1. Creating a Trustful Student–Teacher Relationship and Classroom Atmosphere

After graduating from junior college, Teacher Z went to undergraduate school for further study and developed rich subject knowledge and high teaching skills. The idea of “being close to a teacher and believing in one’s teaching strategies” was often proposed and put into practice by Teacher Z. A trustful student–teacher relationship occupied a fundamental position in successful language teaching.

**Extract 22.** My students were willing to learn English if I spent more time with them. They often said, “if we not studying hard, we would feel sorry for you”, and those words enlightened me a lot. It was quite difficult for students to truly believe in teachers and their teaching competence, but my students trusted me.

Teacher Z also focused on developing students’ English learning motivation and emphasised the English learning process rather than grades. More importantly, the instrumental aspect of English was often mentioned as actively engaging students in acquiring English knowledge.

**Extract 23.** English teachers knew a lot about western culture, so they might easily have new thoughts and like to communicate with students. English was a very useful language and closely associated with your life. In future, you needed to take college English tests and travel abroad to use the English language.
According to Teacher Z, teaching competence primarily lies in the establishment of a good teacher-student relationship and a harmonious teaching atmosphere. He also indicated that a good command of the English language relates closely to his cognition of English subjects, students' learning needs, and the social influence of the English language.

4.3.2. Being Conscientious and Dedicated and Loving English Teaching

Teacher Z had been teaching English for decades and had devoted his life to this school. He believed that teachers should not only educate students but learn from them, and he disagreed that teaching is a superior profession. Instead, he endeavoured to narrow the distance between himself and his students.

**Extract 24.** I usually didn't leave class immediately and would like to talk with my students before class. I thought there was a gap between teachers and students because many students regarded their teachers as sages. I never expected to build this image and just wanted to get along well with them.

Teacher Z did not leave in a hurry after class but would choose to communicate with students after each class to understand their learning needs, reflecting his responsibility and commitment. He also believed that high school students have self-awareness and critical thinking abilities. Only when the teacher was sincerely dedicated could students truly value friendship with him. Thus, he was willing to assume a parental role and give students more guidance and love.

**Extract 25.** Students performed like adults, and they didn't like you because you gave them candies or cookies. Reversely, it depended on your efforts in daily life. When students made mistakes, I didn't simply punish them, because a teacher should guide students to realise their misbehaviour and study problems.

Additionally, Teacher Z expressed that a teacher with good professional ethics could dive into the teaching profession and energise the classroom: “If you loved your profession, you would devote yourself to it, so that students had the motivation to learn English”.

4.3.3. Valuing Instrumentality of the English Language and Developing Students' Communicative Competence

Teacher Z regarded the English language as an indispensable instrument and skill that would be used for a lifetime. In English teaching, he consciously instructed students to understand the instrumental aspect of English knowledge to increase their learning motivation. He believed in the importance of developing students' English communicative abilities in senior high school rather than achieving good marks on English examinations.

**Extract 26.** I always told my students that the English language must be useful, no matter whether you studied art or science in senior high school. Even if you found a toilet in a foreign country, you had to use the English language. So, I willingly taught students that English communicative competence was most important, rather than a college entrance examination.

Teacher Z believed that ELT should focus on developing students' communicative competence. Therefore, he devoted his attention to cultivating students' comprehensive English abilities, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, and deemed that test-oriented teaching ignored students' speaking ability, leading to their unbalanced development in English learning.

**Extract 27.** Many policies cared about the instrumental aspect of English, and students should not simply regard English as subject knowledge. Nowadays, English exams focus on students' listening ability but ignore their speaking ability.

Evidently, Teacher Z's beliefs about teaching and learning were embodied in his emphasis on the practical value of the English language and conscious cultivation of students' communicative abilities. The formation of this concept was closely bound up
with the social influence of English as a global language, students’ needs, and the national English examination.

4.3.4. Engaging in Continuous Reflection and Scientific Research

After receiving his English college diploma, Teacher Z obtained his bachelor’s degree, and he had been working at this school for 23 years. During this period, he participated in many competitions and teacher training programmes to update his expertise. Moreover, he often reflected on problems that arose in educational contexts, putting his thoughts into words, and published some journal articles, which aided his career advancement.

Extract 28. I published some articles in order to put my ideas into words instead of job promotion. But X Provincial Education Department suddenly started teacher professional title assessment in 2009, and such articles were an important requirement of professional promotion. Thus, those papers helped me become the youngest senior teacher.

Apart from that, Teacher Z focused on reflection and attempted to solve practical teaching problems and improve his teaching efficiency. Due to salient difference in the average scores of the two classes he taught, he had to adjust the teaching pace and content to the levels of students.

Extract 29. Sometimes students in low-level classes could not master knowledge taught in the high-level class. But students in high-level classes needed to learn more challenging teaching content. It was necessary for teachers to constantly reflect on what and how to teach for different levels of students.

Teacher Z attached great importance to the role of reflection in tackling real-world problems and theorising personal thoughts or ideas. Tsui [6] also found that expert EFL teachers positively engaged in conscious deliberation and reflection and could theorise practical knowledge and practicalise theoretical knowledge. Teacher Z’s belief about professional developmental was due to his love and passion for teaching as well as the school’s class division policy and job promotions.

5. Discussion

5.1. Excellent EFL Teachers’ Professional Qualities

This study examined the characteristics and influencing factors of Chinese excellent senior high school EFL teachers’ professional profiles. Echoing previous research [5,6], the results reveal four themes of excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities. The three teachers in our study had strong English language pedagogical content competence (i.e., advocating interest-oriented teaching, expanding knowledge, encouraging differentiated instruction, and establishing a good teacher–student relationship and classroom atmosphere). They had firm beliefs about the foreign language teaching profession and professional ethics (i.e., responsibility of imparting knowledge and educating people and transmitting culture, dedication, and love for the English language and teaching). They possessed certain beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning (i.e., advocating student-centredness and the teacher’s leading role, developing students’ competence and minds, and valuing instrumental and humanistic aspects of the English language). They also held beliefs about language teacher learning and development (i.e., pursuing lifelong learning and innovative scientific research, engaging in continuous reflection).

Constant exploration of new ideas brought about changes and contributed to sustaining teachers’ commitment [6], and excellent teachers showed great willingness to seek approaches to reflect on their teaching practice [7]. The four themes of excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities were interconnected, dynamic, and developmental [5]. For example, excellent EFL teachers still loved language teaching and learning after many years of teaching practice, continuously improving their professional qualities, and consciously living up to the ideals of lifelong learning through seeking favourable external resources, such as communication with students, teacher training, and demonstration classes. Addi-
tionally, compared to Wu’s [5] findings in the Chinese university context, excellent senior high school EFL teachers exhibited stronger beliefs in serving students and focused more on students’ attitudes towards the English language and their learning performance, communicative competence, and mental developmental. This may be pertinent to the fact that senior high school English teachers share the common goal of preparing students for the national college entrance examination. Meanwhile, quite a few of them also worked as head teachers and spent extra time with students in their daily teaching practice.

5.2. Influencing Factors of Excellent EFL Teachers’ Professional Qualities in the Ecological Systems

Another significant finding of the inquiry concerns the factors influencing these three excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities. Guided by Bronfenbrenner’s [20] ecological systems model, as well as findings regarding the teachers’ career trajectories, we present “The nested systems for excellent EFL teacher professional qualities” in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. The nested systems for excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities.](image)

A microsystem is the innermost layer of the model and pertains to EFL teachers themselves, whose elements directly influence the EFL teachers’ professional development. In this research, there are several core elements in the microsystem: students, mentors, colleagues, leaders, and parents. These elements affect EFL teachers’ motivation for teaching and learning English and occupy an important position in shaping and developing their professional qualities. The results resonate with previous studies [29,30] showing that important persons influenced teachers’ development of beliefs and emotional experiences. In this study, EFL teachers were interested in learning English and performing well in class at a young age, and they were often inspired by parents’ and mentors’ encouragement and positive role modelling, which enhanced their interest in learning English and their motivation to teach English in the future [31]. Gao and Xu [3] found a similar result regarding the positive roles of students, parents, mentors, and relatives in activating teachers’ motivation to teach English. Teaching knowledge was constructed in social negotiation and shaped through experiences with important figures in the teaching profession [6,32]. Teachers interacted with leaders, colleagues, and students and maintained harmonious
relationships with those important others, thus improving their professional commitment and qualities. Specifically, teachers usually occupied a leading position in classroom management and were obliged to cultivate students’ positive attitudes towards English while meeting their demands for satisfactory scores on the national college entrance exam, coping with pressures (i.e., teacher performance evaluation), and seeking support (i.e., time and financial support) from school leaders. Yet there may be a salient gap between high external demands and teachers’ extant knowledge and skills in language teaching and classroom management, which further motivates EFL teachers to respond to those events and seek opportunities to survive and thrive in the school context.

An exosystem contains the linkages and process taking place between two or more settings, at least one of which does not involve a developing person, but it affects the development of the immediate setting where the person lives [20]. The results in this inquiry reveal some crucial factors in the exosystem, such as demonstration classes, class division, educational programmes (i.e., visiting other schools, attending meetings, teacher training, and scientific research), school requirements (i.e., enrolment rate and teacher performance evaluation), and job promotion. In this study, these factors were consequences of decisions made by others in the educational context, exerted influences on EFL teachers’ perceptions, attitudes, and expectations, and would spread beyond the immediate psychological and physical contexts [33]. Among those elements in the exosystem, the demonstration class proved to be an excellent path for developing teaching competence. Teachers needed to prepare their lessons while receiving feedback to adapt their teaching content. Besides, negative comments or higher teaching demands provided by school leaders or experts could result in English teaching anxiety [34]. However, professional experience and constructive feedback from colleagues, experts, and leaders after demonstration classes undeniably played a positive role in shaping and developing teacher qualities [6]. Additionally, school administrators divided students into different classes according to their grades. As teachers needed to teach English to these different classes, they had to design appropriate teaching content according to the students’ language proficiency levels. Meanwhile, challenged by teacher performance evaluations and enrolment rates, excellent EFL teachers were willing to invest their energy in undertaking complex tasks or activities that extended their competence [6,7], such as teacher training, attending academic conferences, visiting schools, and striving to adapt well and thrive in educational contexts. Furthermore, EFL teachers pursued continuous learning and development due to severe competition among their peers for job promotions and teaching prizes.

A macrosystem emphasises the overarching patterns of the microsystem, mesosystem, and exosystem, featuring a given culture, subculture, or other extended social structure, such as social beliefs, resources, and lifestyle [20]. As presented in this study, some factors in the macrosystem, such as social beliefs (imparting knowledge and educating people), college entrance examinations, national development, and English as a global language, constantly encouraged EFL teachers to improve their professional proficiency. English is one of the most influential languages in the world, and the Chinese English education reform has been deepened constantly in response to social, economic, and cultural transformations [2,35], simultaneously calling for the cultivation of qualified English teachers [3,4,36]. As one important constituent of the Chinese teaching staff, EFL teachers shoulder the responsibility of cultivating English language talents for the nation. In senior high schools, this belief is embodied in the EFL teaching process, such as cultivating students’ English language knowledge and abilities and helping students smoothly pass the national college entrance examination. Moreover, urgent demands and great respect for teachers in the Chinese education system motivate individuals to become teachers. According to official data, there were 2.704 million full-time teachers in Chinese senior high schools in 2019 [37], and the overall number of teachers was on the rise. In this study, the development of EFL teachers’ professional qualities exhibited a positive response to external social need. Taken together, the cultural, socio-political, community and individual values, and policies affected teachers’ professional development and their
understandings of the world [12,38]. Therefore, attention should be paid to the broader social contexts in which language teaching and learning take place.

EFL teachers, however, face challenges and opportunities brought about by various factors, such as students, colleagues, demonstration classes, job promotion, and college entrance examinations. As teachers are developing persons living in different ecological systems [20], they are able to respond to the impacts brought by the ecosystems to improve their qualities and extend their competence in interaction with the surrounding contexts. In this study, the development of expertise was characterised by constant engagement in exploration and positively responding to challenges [4,6]. Meanwhile, it was apparent that teachers also affect the development of ecosystems, such as maintaining good student–teacher relationships and a harmonious teaching environment. The development of EFL teacher qualities is an outcome of the dynamic interaction between teachers and the contexts in which they operate.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This paper reports on excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities in the Chinese context based on Bronfenbrenner’s ecological systems theory. It adds to our knowledge of excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities, including English language pedagogical content competence, beliefs about the foreign language teaching profession and professional ethics, beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning, and beliefs about language teacher learning and development [5]. Additionally, the findings show a large repertoire of factors influencing teachers’ development of professional qualities in different nested ecosystems. In addition, the ecological subsystems and their elements were interrelated and interactive [20], and permeable boundaries existed among the ecological subsystems and the multidiirectional relationships among various ecological factors in the system [22]. Thus, factors in the three subsystems mentioned above produced synergetic effects on teachers’ professional development. Meanwhile, EFL teachers striving for a vision of “ideal self” [39] consciously drew upon multiple favourable resources to navigate challenges, and they facilitated changes in the ecosystem where they operated.

This study has several implications regarding teachers’ professional qualities in relation to sustainable career trajectories. First, the exploration of excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities provides effective references for pre-service and in-service language teachers to promote their professional development in the school context. The study is also beneficial for those seeking a deep understanding of how expert EFL language teachers develop [7]. Language teachers, especially those developing in adverse school contexts, are able to reflect on their shortcomings and learn excellent teaching beliefs and approaches that can be appropriately utilised in their own language teaching. Teaching should be regarded as a lifelong career requiring professional qualities for personal and career development. Second, various teacher-related factors in ecological systems should be thoroughly considered. Specifically, teachers should establish friendly interpersonal relationships with, and seek help from important others in the microsystem, proactively anticipate potential teaching risks, and adopt feasible suggestions and feedback from mentors, colleagues, and leaders. Moreover, teachers can seize opportunities (i.e., teacher training programmes in the exosystem) to respond to teaching challenges (i.e., college entrance examinations in the macrosystem) and strengthen their job satisfaction and professional commitment to ELT [40]. This will help teachers’ career development at the macro, exo, and micro levels from an ecological perspective. Third, educational policymakers, such as educational administrators and school leaders, should provide favourable resources for teachers’ growth and development and devise reasonable strategies for teacher performance assessment, job promotions, and classroom management. Again, teachers’ sustainable career trajectories should not only be viewed from a micro perspective, such as classroom teaching, but also include social and cultural aspects of their career achievements. The exo and macro factors are deeply rooted in the contexts where EFL teachers not only survive but also thrive in
their career progression. Many educational decisions are pertinent to teachers’ language teaching and learning.

Although this study endeavoured to provide a comprehensive focus on excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities, it has some limitations in terms of the research participants and instruments. First, we chose only three excellent senior high school EFL teachers in a small county in Northeast China and utilised the interview data to delve into their teaching and learning experiences and attitudes towards English language teaching. Therefore, more triangulation of data should be pursued to further unpack excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities. Researchers interested in EFL teachers’ professional qualities can increase the sample size and employ multiple methods (i.e., observation and journals) to explore how English language teachers’ professional qualities shape and are shaped by their contexts through a longitudinal study. Overall, features of excellent EFL teachers’ professional qualities must be expanded in future research.

Author Contributions: Conceptualization, H.L.; Methodology, H.L. and F.F.; Formal analysis, W.C. and H.L.; Writing: Original draft preparation, W.C. and H.L.; Writing: Review and editing, W.C., H.L. and F.F.; Funding: H.L. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This work was supported by Social Science Research Planning Fund of the Education Department of Jilin Province “the Construction and Development of Excellent High School English Teachers’ Professional Capacities: An Ecological Perspective (Grant No. JJKH20211322SK); the Key Project funded by the Academy for Research in Teacher Education, Northeast Normal University (JSJY20180105); and Project of Discipline Innovation and Advancement (PODIA)—Foreign Language Education Studies at Beijing Foreign Studies University (Grant number: 2020SYLZDXM011), Beijing.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted according to the guidelines of the Declaration of Helsinki, and approved by the Institute of Teacher Education Research, Northeast Normal University.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study. Written informed consent has been obtained from the participants to publish this paper.

Data Availability Statement: The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to ethical considerations.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Appendix A. The Participants’ Biographical Vignettes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Biographical Vignettes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W</td>
<td>She graduated from college and began teaching English at this senior high school in 1987. At the time of the study, she was 53 years old and had more than 30 years of teaching experience. She had been rated as a good provincial rookie teacher in 1997, was the municipal core teacher and the English discipline leader in 2002, and was the provincial core teacher in 2015. She was also the first one in this school to apply for the national education project.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Y</td>
<td>She received her English college diploma in 1999 and subsequently taught English at a junior high school for five years. During this period, she continued studying and obtained a bachelor’s degree. Later, she was assigned to a foreign language school and taught junior high school students for four years. In 2008, she came to this senior high school and was rated as the outstanding head teacher, back-bone teacher, and municipal teaching expert. At the time of this study, she was 40 years old and had 19 years of teaching experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Z</td>
<td>He obtained his English college diploma in 1993 and bachelor’s degree in 1995. Owing to his excellent performance in language teaching and researching, he became one of the youngest provincial senior teachers in 2009. At the time of the study, he was 46 years old and had been teaching at this senior high school for about 23 years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B. Detailed Codes of Teacher Quality Profile Are Included under Each Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English Language Pedagogical Content Competence</td>
<td>Advocating interest-oriented teaching, Encouraging differentiated instruction, Expanding knowledge, Building good teacher–student relationships and classroom atmosphere</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs in the Foreign Language Teaching Profession and Professional Ethics</td>
<td>Imparting knowledge and educating people, Transmitting English language culture, Having a spirit of dedication, Showing love for English and the teaching profession</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs in Foreign Language Teaching and Learning</td>
<td>Centring students while advocating the teacher’s leading role, Developing students’ competence and minds, Valuing the instrumentality and humanism of the English language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beliefs of Language Teacher Learning and Development</td>
<td>Pursuing lifelong learning, Engaging in continuous reflection, Striving for innovative scientific research</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix C. Detailed Codes of Ecosystems Are Included under Each Theme

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Microsystem</td>
<td>Students, colleagues, mentors, leaders, parents</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exosystem</td>
<td>Job promotion, teacher training programmes, school requirements, class division, demonstration classes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Macrosystem</td>
<td>Education beliefs (i.e., teachers’ responsibility of educating people), college entrance examination, English as a global language, national development</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Appendix D. An Interview Protocol

1. Why and how did you decide to learn English?
2. When and why did you want to be a teacher?
3. What do you think of the English subject and English language teaching profession?
4. What qualities do you think excellent English teachers should have?
5. Are there any events or persons that influenced your teaching and learning during your career stages?
6. Are there any teaching activities or resources available that have promoted your professional development?

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