

# Lived Experiences of Teaching Adaptation among Returnee Art and Design Teachers in Chinese Higher Education

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## ABSTRACT

Teaching adaptation is a common challenge for returnee teachers in Chinese higher education, particularly in practice-oriented disciplines such as art and design. Existing research has primarily focused on policy contexts and teaching outcomes, with limited attention to how teachers respond to changes in actual classroom practice. This study adopts a qualitative phenomenological approach to examine how returnee art and design teachers adjust their teaching after returning to China. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 15 teachers, and the data were analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings show that teaching adaptation is a gradual process. In the initial stage, teachers experience a clear mismatch between their prior learning experiences and the local classroom environment, particularly in terms of student participation, classroom interaction, and expectations for teaching. As they continue teaching, they adjust their practices in response to student needs and institutional requirements, including curriculum structures and assessment methods. Over time, they develop context-appropriate practices characterized by greater flexibility, closer teacher–student relationships, and ongoing reflection. These findings indicate that teaching adaptation is shaped by everyday classroom interactions and institutional conditions. Universities should provide context-sensitive support, including instructional guidance, opportunities for peer exchange, and flexible assessment arrangements, to better support the teaching development of returnee teachers.

**Keywords:** Teaching adaptation; Returnee teachers; Art and design education; Higher education in China; Phenomenology

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching adaptation is a common challenge for returnee teachers in Chinese higher education, particularly in practice-oriented disciplines such as art and design. Teaching in these disciplines relies on studio practice, creative processes, and classroom interaction, with an emphasis on immediate feedback and continuous communication between teachers and students (Schön, 2017). Unlike lecture-based courses, art and design teaching places greater emphasis on open discussion, individual expression, and practice-based guidance, making the teacher's role more flexible and context-dependent. When teachers return to teach in domestic universities after overseas study, they often encounter a mismatch between their prior learning experiences and

the local classroom environment. This adaptation process is shaped by differences in institutional settings, teaching contexts, and academic practices (Li & Xue, 2021).

In recent years, with the expansion of talent recruitment policies in Chinese universities, an increasing number of scholars with overseas study or work experience have entered higher education institutions. As a result, returnee teachers have become an important part of the academic workforce (Li & Xue, 2021). Existing research has primarily focused on recruitment policies and institutional arrangements, as well as their impact on university development (Horta, 2013; Li & Xue, 2021). Some studies also examine the performance of returnee teachers in terms of research output and teaching effectiveness. While these studies provide valuable insights, they tend to emphasize institutional contexts or outcome-based evaluations. In contrast, there is limited research on how returnee teachers respond to environmental changes in actual teaching practice, and how they adjust their teaching in the classroom. This gap is particularly evident in art and design education, where teaching involves not only knowledge transmission but also the facilitation of students' creative processes. Such teaching is highly context-dependent and interaction-driven. As a result, it is difficult to fully understand teachers' adaptation processes solely from institutional or performance-based perspectives.

Against this background, this study focuses on returnee teachers in art and design disciplines and examines how they adjust their teaching in specific classroom contexts after returning to China. By analyzing their teaching experiences, the study aims to present the development of teaching adaptation in practice and to provide a more grounded perspective on the teaching practices of returnee teachers.

## METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach to understand the teaching adaptation experiences of returnee art and design teachers in Chinese higher education. Phenomenology focuses on describing and interpreting individuals' lived experiences, allowing participants' perspectives on their teaching practices to be captured within specific classroom contexts (Neubauer et al., 2019). Fifteen participants were selected through purposive sampling. All participants had overseas study experience, were currently teaching art and design-related courses, and had undergone teaching adaptation after returning to China. All interviewed teachers were from the same university and belonged to art and design disciplines. This setting provides a relatively consistent institutional and teaching context, which helps to reduce variability across institutions and allows a clearer focus on the adaptation process itself. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. The interview protocol focused on teachers' post-return teaching experiences, including the changes they encountered, the challenges they faced, and how they adjusted their practices. Specifically, the interviews addressed three aspects: initial teaching experiences and their differences from prior learning experiences; key challenges in classroom practice (such as student participation, classroom interaction, and curriculum requirements); and the strategies teachers used to adjust their teaching, including changes in instructional methods, interaction patterns, and reflective practices. All interviews were conducted with participants' consent, audio-recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis through a stepwise process. First, all transcripts were read multiple times to gain familiarity with the data and to identify meaning units related to teaching experience. Second, initial coding was conducted by labeling segments of text relevant to teaching adaptation. Third, similar codes were grouped into higher-level categories, which were further developed into themes representing shared patterns of experience. Finally, the themes were reviewed and refined to ensure clear distinctions between them and to provide a coherent representation of the adaptation process.

Ethical principles were strictly followed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the research purpose prior to the interviews, and informed consent was obtained. All data were anonymized, and participants

were free to withdraw at any stage. To enhance the credibility of the study, several strategies were employed. Interview transcripts were returned to participants for member checking to ensure accuracy. In addition, the researcher repeatedly compared codes and themes with the original data to maintain consistency between interpretation and evidence. These procedures enhance the credibility and transparency of the qualitative analysis.

## RESULTS

This chapter presents and analyzes the teaching adaptation experiences of returnee art and design teachers in Chinese higher education. The analysis focuses on how teachers carry out classroom practice, the challenges they encounter, and how they adjust their teaching after returning to China. Overall, the experiences of the participants reveal a clear process: from an initial mismatch between prior experience and the local classroom, to ongoing adjustment within classroom and institutional contexts, and finally to the development of relatively stable teaching practices. Throughout this process, teachers revise their teaching in response to student participation, classroom interaction, and curriculum and assessment requirements, gradually developing a more context-appropriate understanding of teaching.

### **Initial Mismatch between Prior Experience and Local Classroom.**

At this stage, teachers mainly describe how differences are perceived rather than how they are addressed. Teaching adaptation begins with a sense of discrepancy between prior learning experiences and the local classroom environment. This mismatch reflects the difficulty of directly applying teaching understandings formed during overseas study to a new context. It can be understood in terms of two aspects: teaching expectations and perceived classroom differences.

*Teaching expectations.* Participants emphasized that their initial understanding of teaching was largely shaped by their experiences as students in overseas classrooms rather than by formal pedagogical training. These experiences informed expectations of active participation, open discussion, and a more dialogic classroom environment.

When recalling his early classroom experience, T3 explained:

*“When I was in class abroad, everyone would take the initiative to speak, and sometimes they would even rush to express their thoughts. The teacher is more of a guide and will not speak all the time.”*

This expectation influenced how he initially approached teaching. He continued:

*“So, when I first started class, I would stop and wait for the students to respond, but I found that everyone was quiet, and I was a little overwhelmed.”*

A similar perception was described by T7:

*“I used to be used to the kind of discussion class where everyone would constantly develop around a topic. But now sometimes after I ask questions, the classroom is very quiet. At that moment, it feels a bit of a gap.”*

These accounts show that prior learning experiences shaped how teachers initially interpreted classroom situations. Rather than being abstract beliefs, these expectations served as a reference point for recognizing differences in the new teaching context.

*Perceived Classroom Differences.* As teaching unfolded, teachers became increasingly aware of differences between their expectations and actual classroom situations. These differences emerged gradually through classroom interaction and were mainly reflected in patterns of student participation, interaction dynamics, and expectations for teaching structure.

For instance, T1 described:

***“Sometimes when I ask questions, students just look down at their books or computers and few of them actively respond.”***

Reflecting on this, he added:

***“At first, I thought it might be the way I asked the question, but later I realized it was quite common.”***

Teachers also noted differences in students’ expectations. T5 explained:

***“Abroad, students are used to expressing their own ideas. Here, they tend to wait for a standard answer from the teacher. Without clear direction, they feel uncertain.”***

Changes in classroom pace were also observed. T9 noted:

***“I used to leave time for discussion, but if I do that now, the room can become silent.”***

These experiences highlight how differences are recognized through ongoing interaction. At this stage, teachers do not yet focus on modifying their teaching but on making sense of the gap between prior experience and current classroom realities.

### **Ongoing Adjustment within Classroom and Institutional Contexts**

At this stage, the focus shifts from perceiving differences to responding to them in practice. Teaching adaptation unfolds through continuous attempts to address classroom challenges while working within institutional conditions. Rather than being a single change, adjustment develops through repeated experimentation and feedback. This stage includes two dimensions: classroom-level responses and institutional adaptation.

*Teaching adjustment.* As teachers gained experience, they began to respond to specific classroom situations by modifying their teaching approaches. These responses often emerged from immediate challenges, such as low participation or limited interaction. T2 described:

***“I started breaking questions into smaller parts. Instead of asking a big question directly, I would ask something more specific first.”***

He added:

***“That way, students gradually begin to speak, and the atmosphere improves.”***

Similarly, some teachers reduce expression pressure by changing the form of interaction. For example, when talking about the use of group discussions, T6 shared:

***“I will now use more group discussions, so that they can speak in a small area and then share. In this way, students will be more willing to express themselves and will not face the pressure of the whole class all at once.”***

These responses reflect ongoing attempts to address classroom situations. Teachers experiment with different approaches and adjust them based on student reactions. At this stage, teaching is characterized by active response rather than stable practice.

*Institutional adaptation.* In addition to responding to classroom situations, teachers also adjust their practices within institutional constraints. Factors such as course structure, syllabus requirements, and assessment formats shape how teaching responses can be implemented. T4 noted:

***“The syllabus is already set, so there is limited room for adjustment.”***

He further explained:

***“Some content has to be covered, so the only thing you can change is how you teach it.”***

Assessment requirements also influenced teaching decisions. T8 stated:

***“The evaluation method will also affect the teaching, such as the final evaluation of the work, so the teaching in my middle should be designed around this. Sometimes you want to make some open-ended attempts, but you also must consider whether the student can complete the requirements in the end.”***

These accounts show that adjustment takes place within defined institutional boundaries. Teachers respond to classroom situations, but their responses are shaped by structural conditions that limit and guide possible changes.

### **Development of Adapted Teaching Practices**

At this stage, adaptation is reflected in more stable and consistent teaching practices. Rather than focusing on immediate responses, teachers develop patterns of teaching that can be applied across different situations. Teaching becomes less reactive and more self-regulated. This stage can be understood in terms of three aspects: flexibility, relational understanding, and reflection.

*Teaching flexibility.* With accumulated experience, teachers demonstrate greater flexibility in how they organize teaching. This includes adjusting pacing, content, and interaction in ways that are responsive to classroom conditions. T3 explained:

***“Now I don’t follow a fixed rhythm. I adjust based on how students are feeling.”***

Some teachers have also begun to prepare multiple scenarios before class to deal with different situations. T7 mentions:

***“I will now prepare several different teaching plans in advance and choose according to the classroom situation. Unlike at the beginning, only one design is followed.”***

These practices reflect a shift toward more stable but adaptable teaching approaches. Flexibility at this stage is not experimental but embedded in established teaching routines.

*Relationship Adjustment.* Teachers also develop a more nuanced understanding of their relationships with students. Rather than focusing only on techniques, they become more attentive to communication and interaction patterns. T5 stated:

***“Later on, I would take the time to get to know the students, such as their interests and habits. Once you understand them, communication becomes much smoother.”***

Similarly, T2 also emphasized the importance of extracurricular communication:

***“I now prefer to communicate more with the students, not just about issues related to class. This makes them more relaxed in class and more willing to participate.”***

These testimonies demonstrate how this change in the teacher-student dynamic has made classroom interactions more organic and helped to alleviate some of the initial uneasiness. Instead of only changing methods, teaching increasingly relies on building strong relationships to create a more stable classroom atmosphere.

*Reflection.* Reflection becomes an important mechanism for maintaining and refining teaching practices. Teachers regularly review their teaching experiences and make small adjustments over time. For example:

***“After each class, I think about what didn’t work well and how I can improve it next time.”***

T1 added:

***“Sometimes it’s not a major issue, just small details that need adjustment.”***

From a longer-term perspective, teachers also reframe their understanding of teaching. P9 reflected:

***“Teaching is a process of trial and error, and you will slowly find the right way for you. Now I won’t be as anxious as I was at the beginning but be calmer.”***

At this stage, reflection supports continuity rather than initial change. Teaching becomes more stable as teachers develop the capacity to regulate their own practice.

## DISCUSSION

This study examines how returnee art and design teachers adapt their teaching in Chinese higher education through their classroom experiences. The findings suggest that teaching adaptation is not a direct shift from one approach to another. Rather, it unfolds progressively, moving from an initial mismatch to ongoing adjustment and, eventually, to more stable teaching practices. Adaptation appears to originate in concrete classroom situations rather than through deliberate planning. Teachers encounter uncertainty in practice when they cannot directly apply prior learning experiences. In this sense, adaptation emerges through everyday teaching activities, rather than as a response to institutional change alone (Li & Xue, 2021). In art and design education, this mismatch is particularly visible. Teaching relies heavily on interaction and practice, both of which are closely shaped by student participation.

The findings further show that adaptation develops through continuous responses to classroom situations. Teachers adjust their teaching based on student reactions while working within constraints such as curriculum structures and assessment requirements. Teaching practice is therefore closely tied to specific classroom conditions and student learning patterns (Trigwell et al., 1999). This study shows that such agency is not exercised independently but develops through ongoing negotiation between classroom dynamics and institutional expectations. The lens of reflective practice provides a theoretical perspective for understanding these findings. Reflective practice refers to the continuous process by which teachers review and adjust their actions in response to experience, thereby improving their teaching (Kember et al., 2000). Rather than applying fixed teaching models, teachers reflect on their experiences during teaching and adjust their practices based on classroom feedback. This form of reflection-in-action enables teaching to shift from reactive responses toward more self-regulated practice. Teaching adaptation also involves a reconfiguration of teachers’ professional roles. Teacher

identity is commonly understood as an ongoing process through which teachers construct and reconstruct their roles within specific contexts (Beauchamp & Thomas, 2009). In a new teaching environment, returnee teachers continually reposition themselves between prior experience and local classroom expectations. This reflects the dynamic nature of teacher identity as it evolves through practice.

Building on these findings, this study proposes a context-informed view of teaching support. Support should not be treated as a one-time intervention but should align with the evolving nature of teaching adaptation and be embedded in everyday practice. In the initial stage, support can help teachers interpret classroom dynamics and translate prior experience into local teaching practice. During the adjustment stage, practical and usable resources, such as lesson plans, teaching strategies, and collaborative tools, are needed to support classroom-level responses. As teaching becomes more stable, opportunities for reflection and exchange become increasingly important, enabling individual experience to develop into shared understanding.

## CONCLUSION

This study explores the process of teaching adaptation among returnee art and design teachers in Chinese higher education based on their lived experiences. The following conclusions are drawn:

1. Teaching adaptation is a gradual process rather than a one-time change. It involves an initial mismatch between prior experience and local classrooms, followed by ongoing adjustment, and the gradual formation of adapted teaching practices. Teaching is therefore not fixed but continuously shaped in specific situations.
2. In the initial stage, teachers find that their prior learning experiences do not fully fit local classrooms. This is reflected in student participation, classroom interaction, and expectations of teaching. The starting point of adaptation lies in this gap between expectation and experience.
3. During the adjustment stage, teachers revise their practices in response to student needs and institutional requirements. Their teaching is shaped by both classroom interaction and structural constraints, rather than by individual choice alone.
4. Over time, teachers develop more flexible and stable teaching practices. Reflection and teacher–student relationships support this process, allowing teaching to move from reactive adjustment to more self-regulated practice.

Based on these findings, teaching support should be aligned with the phased nature of adaptation. Universities should provide continuous and context-sensitive support that responds to teachers' needs at different stages of their development.

The main contribution of this study is the development of a stage-based understanding of teaching adaptation grounded in the experiences of returnee art and design teachers. The findings show that adaptation is not a single shift, but a process involving mismatch, adjustment, and the formation of stable practices. This process aligns with the idea of “adjusting in action” in reflective practice and reflects how teachers continuously reconstruct their professional roles in different contexts. This pattern is particularly evident in art and design education. Teaching in these disciplines relies heavily on interaction, practice-based learning, and responsiveness to changing design contexts. As a result, teaching often requires ongoing adjustment within both structured curricula and evolving practical demands. In this sense, teaching adaptation involves not only responding to classroom situations, but also continuously negotiating the practical and time-sensitive nature of the discipline. This perspective highlights the context-bound and generative nature of teaching and offers a process-oriented framework for understanding how teachers adapt in practice-based fields.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. Universities can provide support at the early stage of teaching adaptation by helping teachers interpret local classroom practices. Classroom observation, teaching examples, and peer exchange can help reduce uncertainty and support the transition from prior experience to local practice.
2. During the adjustment stage, more practical support resources are needed. Instead of abstract guidance, teachers benefit from concrete examples of classroom interaction, questioning strategies, and course organization that can be applied directly in teaching.
3. At the institutional level, some flexibility should be maintained in curriculum design and assessment requirements. Clear expectations can reduce uncertainty, while allowing space for teachers to adjust their practices.
4. As teaching becomes more stable, universities can support long-term development through regular opportunities for reflection and exchange. Informal discussions, teaching sharing sessions, and small-scale peer interactions can help transform individual experience into shared practice.
5. Future research can expand this study by including different institutional contexts or disciplines. Longitudinal or mixed-method approaches may also provide further insight into how teaching adaptation develops over time.

At the same time, it is necessary to point out that there are certain limitations in this study. First, the sample size of this study is relatively small, including only 15 interviewed teachers, and their experiences may not cover a wider range of scenarios. Secondly, all participants are from the same university, which limits the transferability of research results to a certain extent, and the system and teaching environment of different institutions may present different adaptation processes. In addition, as a qualitative study, the analysis of this study is inevitably affected by the researcher's understanding and interpretation and may have a certain degree of subjectivity. Based on the above factors, this study is more suitable for providing a contextual understanding of the teaching adaptation process, rather than directly generalizing it to all higher education contexts. Future studies can further enhance the scope of the findings by expanding the sample scope or comparing different institutional backgrounds.

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### Declaration of conflicting interest

The authors have no competing interests to declare that are relevant to the content of this article.