

# The Influence of SoTL Competence Towards Foreign Language Teachers in Chinese Provincial Normal Universities: A Conceptual Paper

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## Abstract

This conceptual paper explores the influence of Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) competence on foreign language teachers (FLT) in provincial normal universities in China, with a focus on the mediating role of teacher commitment. Grounded in Institutional Theory and the Pedagogy of Learning, the study examines how institutional dynamics and pedagogical practices shape FLT's professional identity and commitment. SoTL competence, characterized by reflective inquiry, methodological rigor, collaboration, and public dissemination, is positioned as a transformative framework for enhancing teaching practices and fostering professional growth. The paper highlights the unique challenges faced by FLT, including heavy workloads, limited research opportunities, and the complexities of non-native language instruction. By integrating theoretical insights and proposing a conceptual model, this study underscores the potential of SoTL competence to drive educational innovation, improve teacher effectiveness, and contribute to institutional excellence. The findings have significant implications for academic institutions, educators, and policymakers, emphasizing the need for systemic alignment to support SoTL initiatives and advance the quality of education.

**Keywords:** Scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), foreign language teachers (FLT), teacher commitment, Institutional Theory

## Introduction

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has emerged as a transformative framework in higher education, emphasizing the scholarly inquiry of teaching practices and their impact on student learning. Coined from Boyer's (1997) pioneering framework of four scholarships teaching, discovery, application, and integration SoTL provides a structured approach to exploring the dynamic interactions between educators and learners. Over time, SoTL has evolved to encompass not just the act of teaching but also the broader process of learning, fostering a culture of evidence-based pedagogical practices. By positioning teaching as a scholarly endeavour, SoTL encourages educators to critically reflect on their instructional methods, make data-informed adjustments, and actively disseminate their findings to enhance academic discourse and institutional practices (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011).

In the specific context of foreign language teachers (FLT), SoTL competence holds unique significance. Unlike traditional subject areas, foreign language teaching involves navigating complex intersections of culture, communication,

and linguistic proficiency. This complexity is heightened in provincial normal universities, where teachers often face institutional challenges such as limited research opportunities and demanding teaching loads. SoTL competence can empower FLT's to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and classroom application, creating environments where both teachers and students thrive. By integrating reflective practices, collaborative inquiry, and innovative methodologies, foreign language educators can address the unique pedagogical demands of their discipline while aligning with global educational goals such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goal on quality education (United Nations, 2015).

This paper seeks to conceptually explore the influence of SoTL competence on foreign language teachers' professional identity and commitment, with particular emphasis on the mediating role of teacher agency and institutional factors. By synthesizing theoretical insights from institutional theory and the pedagogy of learning, this study provides a conceptual framework for understanding how SoTL can drive educational innovation, improve teacher effectiveness, and enhance student outcomes in diverse academic contexts. The study not only highlights the practical implications of SoTL for educators but also addresses broader questions about the role of scholarship in fostering systemic improvements in education.

## Background and Problem Statement

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) has gained considerable traction as a pivotal framework for enhancing teaching practices and student learning in higher education. However, the literature on SoTL remains limited in its exploration of foreign language teachers (FLT's), particularly within provincial normal universities. While SoTL emphasizes inquiry-driven practices and evidence-based teaching, much of the existing research focuses on broader disciplinary contexts, overlooking the unique demands of foreign language instruction. These gaps have significant implications, as FLT's operate in environments characterized by distinct pedagogical challenges and institutional constraints. The lack of focus on this specialized group leaves a void in understanding how SoTL competence can impact their professional identity and commitment, making it crucial to address this research gap (Felten & Geertsema, 2023).

Foreign language teachers face a unique set of challenges that distinguish their roles from educators in other disciplines. The nature of foreign language instruction demands the integration of linguistic proficiency, cultural fluency, and effective communication skills, requiring teachers to adopt innovative and dynamic approaches to engage students. Additionally, FLT's often work in non-native language contexts, which creates added complexity in their roles. In provincial normal universities, these challenges are compounded by institutional limitations, such as heavy teaching loads, minimal research support, and lower professional status compared to other academic fields. These factors can significantly hinder FLT's' ability to develop and apply SoTL competencies effectively, leaving them with fewer opportunities to innovate or reflect on their teaching practices (Narayana & Avvaru, 2024).

Institutional and pedagogical frameworks further amplify these challenges by shaping the working conditions and professional identities of FLT's. The institutional emphasis on traditional research outputs often sidelines pedagogical inquiry, discouraging FLT's from prioritizing reflective teaching practices. Moreover, the lack of institutional support for SoTL-related initiatives limits FLT's' ability to collaborate, experiment, and share findings, creating a disconnect between teaching and research. Pedagogically, foreign language instruction demands a nuanced understanding of student needs, cross-cultural interactions, and language acquisition processes, which are often inadequately addressed in teacher preparation programs. Addressing these intersecting challenges through the lens of SoTL competence offers an opportunity to foster professional growth among FLT's while enhancing the quality of education they provide.

Keith Trigwell's article highlights that practitioners of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) are more inclined to foster deep and meaningful learning experiences for students (Trigwell, 2013). This demonstrates the positive impact of SoTL on enhancing student learning outcomes. Educational research, as a distinct subfield within social science research, employs unique methods, tools, and procedures grounded in established theories and prior studies. Even instructors with significant expertise in research within their own disciplines often require guidance to develop rigorous and credible studies. Such support helps ensure that the resulting data can effectively contribute to enhancing instructional practices and enables educators to engage meaningfully in the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL).

## Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in two key theories: Institutional Theory and the Pedagogy of Learning through which the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) competence is examined as a driving force influencing foreign language teachers (FLT's). These theories offer critical perspectives on the ways in which institutional settings and pedagogical practices impact FLT's' professional identity and commitment, positioning FLT's as the dependent variable in

this conceptual exploration.

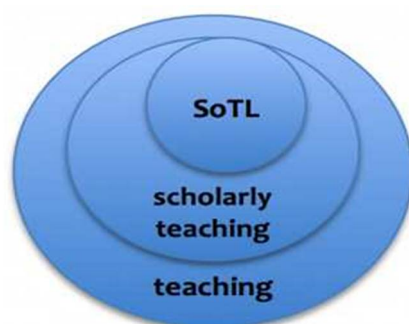


Figure 1. Concept of SoTL (Trigwell, 2013)

## Institutional Theory

Institutional theory provides a structural framework to understand the forces that shape the professional experiences of FLT. Within educational institutions, teachers often face challenges such as heavy teaching workloads, limited research opportunities, and undervaluation of their disciplines. According to Lammers and Barbour (2006), institutions are "constellations of established practices guided by enduring, formalized, rational beliefs." For FLT, institutional norms and policies significantly affect their engagement with SoTL practices, impacting their ability to innovate, reflect, and grow professionally.

Institutional dynamics influence FLT's professional identity in profound ways. For instance, the organizational emphasis on traditional research outputs may deprioritize reflective teaching practices, sidelining pedagogical inquiry critical to SoTL competence. By understanding these institutional constraints and opportunities, this study explores how SoTL competence can empower FLT to navigate structural limitations, fostering a sense of purpose and agency in their roles.

## The Pedagogy of Learning

The pedagogy of learning emphasizes the art and science of teaching, focusing on how educators facilitate knowledge acquisition and foster critical thinking. Defined by Loughran (2013) as the decision-making processes that guide teaching practices, this framework underscores the importance of aligning instructional methods with students' needs and learning contexts. For FLT, whose roles are distinct due to the complexity of language teaching, the pedagogy of learning is particularly relevant. Their responsibilities go beyond grammar and vocabulary, encompassing cultural fluency, communication skills, and cross-disciplinary understanding.

By adopting SoTL principles, FLT can enhance their pedagogical practices, creating learner-centered environments that promote student engagement and success. This study applies the pedagogy of learning to analyze how SoTL competence transforms FLT's instructional strategies, aligning their teaching methods with global educational demands and cultivating a deeper professional identity.

## Connecting the Dependent Variable: Foreign Language Teachers

FLT serve as the focal point of this study, positioned as the dependent variable influenced by SoTL competence. Their professional identity and commitment are shaped by the interplay of institutional and pedagogical factors, which either hinder or support their development. The unique characteristics of FLT such as their need for cultural adaptability, linguistic proficiency, and innovative methodologies make them particularly suited to benefit from the reflective and inquiry-driven practices of SoTL. However, institutional constraints often limit their ability to engage fully with SoTL, making it critical to explore strategies that bridge this gap.

## Synthesis: Professional Identity and Commitment

Together, Institutional Theory and the Pedagogy of Learning provide a holistic lens to examine how SoTL competence impacts FLT's professional identity and commitment. Institutional factors shape the recognition and support FLT's receive, while pedagogical practices influence their ability to reflect, adapt, and grow in their roles. This conceptual framework positions SoTL as a mediating factor that enhances FLT's capacity to overcome challenges, fostering a sense of purpose and fulfilment in their professional lives.

## SoTL Competence

The Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) competence represents an essential framework for improving teaching practices and fostering student learning in higher education. Rooted in Boyer's (1997) foundational concepts of discovery, integration, application, and teaching, SoTL extends traditional views of scholarship by positioning teaching as a form of intellectual inquiry. This paradigm encourages educators to systematically examine their teaching practices, apply evidence-based methodologies, and disseminate their findings to contribute to the wider academic community. As such, SoTL competence is not only a marker of professional growth for educators but also a mechanism for advancing institutional and pedagogical excellence (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011).

Key Principles of SoTL Competence Felten (2013) identifies five core principles that define effective practices in SoTL: inquiry into student learning, grounding in context, methodologically sound approaches, collaboration with students, and public dissemination of findings. These principles serve as a heuristic framework for assessing SoTL initiatives and guiding educators in their scholarly endeavours:

***Inquiry into Student Learning:*** The primary focus of SoTL is on understanding and improving student learning. This involves examining not only how students acquire disciplinary knowledge and skills but also how they develop attitudes and habits conducive to lifelong learning. For foreign language teachers (FLT's), this principle is particularly significant, as their teaching extends beyond linguistic competencies to encompass cultural understanding and communication skills (Biggs, 1999, as cited in Felten, 2013). By engaging in reflective inquiry, FLT's can identify effective strategies for fostering meaningful and transformative learning experiences in the language classroom.

***Grounding in Context:*** SoTL competence requires an understanding of the diverse contexts in which teaching and learning occur. Factors such as institutional priorities, student demographics, and disciplinary norms shape the ways in which SoTL principles are applied. For FLT's working in provincial normal universities, contextual challenges such as heavy workloads, limited resources, and non-native language environments necessitate tailored approaches to SoTL. By situating their inquiries within these specific contexts, FLT's can address the unique needs of their students and institutions while enhancing their professional practice (Peters, Schodt, & Walczak, 2008).

***Methodologically Sound Approaches:*** Robust methodology is a cornerstone of SoTL competence. While the methodologies employed may vary across disciplines, the deliberate use of research tools to link inquiry with student learning outcomes is crucial. For FLT's, adopting interdisciplinary and reflective approaches such as action research, classroom observation, and student feedback analysis enables them to align their instructional practices with evidence-based insights. This methodological rigor not only enhances teaching effectiveness but also bolsters the credibility of SoTL as an academic field (Huber & Morreale, 2002; Bass & Linkon, 2008).

***Collaboration with Students:*** Effective SoTL practices emphasize collaborative inquiry, fostering partnerships between educators and students. This collaboration deepens the understanding of learning processes and promotes a shared sense of responsibility for academic success. For FLT's, involving students in SoTL projects through activities like peer assessments, dialogue-based feedback, and co-designing learning materials can create a more democratic and inclusive learning environment. These collaborative efforts allow FLT's to gain valuable insights into student experiences while empowering learners to take an active role in their education (Hutchings, Huber, & Ciccone, 2011; Werder & Otis, 2010).

***Public Dissemination of Findings:*** A defining feature of SoTL is the commitment to making scholarly work on teaching and learning accessible to the wider academic community. Shulman (2004) emphasized the importance of "going public" to

validate teaching as a form of intellectual inquiry. For FLT, sharing their SoTL findings through conference presentations, journal publications, and digital platforms not only contributes to professional discourse but also enhances the visibility and status of foreign language education within academia. Public dissemination ensures that the outcomes of reflective teaching practices extend beyond individual classrooms, fostering a culture of continuous improvement in education (Felten, 2013; Bernstein & Bass, 2005).

**Significance in Higher Education and FLT Contexts** SoTL competence plays a pivotal role in shaping the professional identity and commitment of FLT, particularly in provincial normal universities where teaching and research demands are often imbalanced. By adopting SoTL principles, FLT can navigate institutional challenges, enhance their pedagogical practices, and foster a sense of agency and fulfillment in their roles. Additionally, SoTL competence aligns with broader educational goals, such as improving teaching quality and promoting lifelong learning, thereby contributing to institutional excellence and student success.

## Conceptual Framework Development

This conceptual framework integrates SoTL competence (independent variable), foreign language teachers (FLT) (dependent variable), and the mediating roles of institutional factors and pedagogical considerations, providing a comprehensive lens to understand how SoTL drives professional development and innovation in teaching and learning.

### The Conceptual Model: An Overview

**SoTL Competence** SoTL competence represents the capacity of educators to engage in reflective, evidence-based teaching practices aimed at enhancing student learning. Drawing on Felten's (2013) principles such as inquiry into student learning, methodological rigor, collaboration, and public dissemination SoTL competence empowers teachers to continually innovate in their pedagogical approaches.

**Foreign Language Teachers (FLT)** FLT are at the core of the framework, serving as the primary beneficiaries of enhanced SoTL competence. Their professional identity, commitment, and effectiveness in the classroom are shaped by their ability to integrate SoTL principles into their practice, overcoming contextual challenges and improving student outcomes.

## Narrative Integration of Framework Components

### SoTL Competence as a Catalyst for Change

At its core, SoTL competence acts as a driving force for innovation in teaching and learning. Through reflective inquiry, teachers identify gaps in their instructional practices and implement data-driven strategies to address them. For FLT, SoTL offers tools to navigate the multifaceted challenges of language instruction, such as balancing linguistic and cultural dimensions while engaging diverse learners (Chaka et al., 2022). By fostering a commitment to continuous improvement, SoTL competence equips FLT to not only enhance their teaching methods but also adapt to the evolving demands of higher education (Hargreaves, 2021; Perez, 2024).

### Institutional Factors as Enablers and Barriers

Institutional dynamics significantly influence FLT's adoption of SoTL practices. Supportive environments that prioritize teaching quality and offer resources for pedagogical research enable teachers to thrive. For instance, professional development programs and collaborative research initiatives aligned with SoTL principles can empower FLT to integrate reflective practices into their work (Azeem et al., 2021). Conversely, institutional constraints such as rigid tenure requirements or limited funding can discourage SoTL engagement, perpetuating a disconnect between teaching and research. Institutional theory underscores the importance of aligning organizational structures with SoTL goals to foster a culture of innovation and collaboration (Haug & Mork, 2021; Hofstadler et al., 2021).

## Pedagogical Considerations as the Practice Framework

The pedagogy of learning emphasizes the need for adaptable teaching methods informed by an understanding of students' needs and contexts. For FLT, this means going beyond conventional language instruction to create communication-rich and culturally relevant learning environments. SoTL competence enables FLT to design innovative curricula, leverage student feedback, and address individual learning styles. By applying cognitive and behaviorist theories, FLT can enhance student engagement and foster meaningful learning experiences, reinforcing the transformative potential of SoTL principles (Barton, 2024).

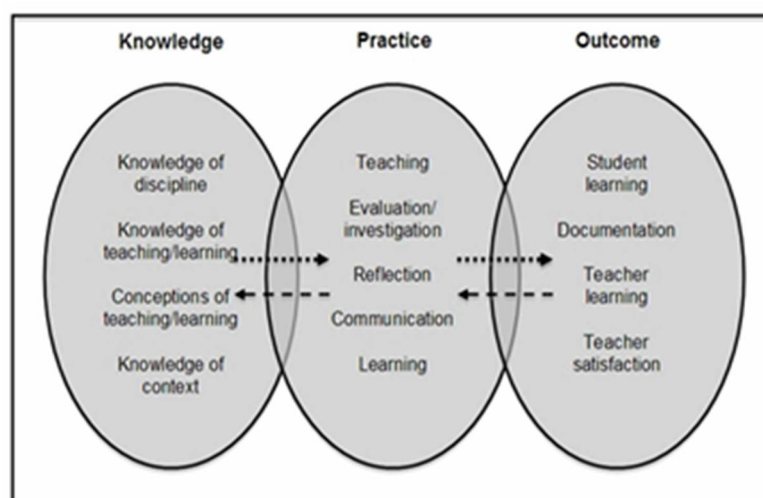


Figure 2. Components of a Model of SoTL (Trigwell & Shale, 2004)

Figure 2 illustrates a framework comprising three interconnected components of teaching: knowledge, practice, and outcomes, alongside a separate scholarship element. Each teaching component is defined by a set of specific elements. As highlighted by these authors, the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) is initiated when scholarly teaching practices are shared publicly. Furthermore, academic knowledge remains subject to ongoing public scrutiny, discussion, re-evaluation, and adaptation (Trigwell & Shale, 2004).

## Professional Identity and Commitment of FLTs

SoTL competence directly contributes to the professional identity and commitment of FLTs by fostering a sense of agency, purpose, and recognition. Reflective teaching practices help FLTs articulate their roles as both educators and scholars, while institutional support enhances their motivation to engage with SoTL (Christoforidou, & Kyriakides, 2021). This alignment not only improves teaching effectiveness but also cultivates a deeper connection to their professional community, reinforcing their dedication to advancing language education (Youzhong, Hong, & Lian, 2018).

## SoTL Competence as a Driver of Innovation

This conceptual framework positions SoTL competence as the linchpin for innovation in teaching and learning. By empowering FLTs to adopt evidence-based practices, SoTL encourages experimentation, collaboration, and dissemination of best practices. Institutional and pedagogical factors serve as mediators that either amplify or limit the impact of SoTL, highlighting the need for systemic alignment to support educational transformation. The framework ultimately emphasizes the potential of SoTL to revolutionize teaching practices, enhance professional development, and contribute to the broader goals of quality education (Beatson et al., 2022).

## Implications and Conclusion

### Broader Implications

The conceptual framework developed in this study underscores significant implications for academic institutions, educators, and policymakers, particularly in the context of fostering Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) competence and its impact on foreign language teachers (FLT)s).

*Implications for Academic Institutions* - Institutions play a pivotal role in shaping the teaching and research environments for educators, especially in provincial normal universities where resources are often constrained. By embedding SoTL principles within institutional policies and practices, universities can create supportive ecosystems for professional growth. Initiatives such as professional development programs, funding for pedagogical research, and recognition systems that value teaching excellence alongside traditional research outputs can empower FLT)s. Furthermore, fostering interdisciplinary collaborations and encouraging the dissemination of SoTL findings can position teaching as a vital scholarly pursuit, ultimately improving institutional rankings and student outcomes.

*Implications for Educators* - For FLT)s, SoTL competence offers a structured approach to enhancing their instructional methods, fostering professional identity, and addressing the unique challenges of language teaching. By engaging in reflective inquiry, collaborative projects, and evidence-based practices, educators can develop innovative strategies tailored to their students' needs. SoTL competence also fosters a sense of agency and fulfilment, reinforcing educators' commitment to their roles. Empowering FLT)s to embrace SoTL principles not only enhances their teaching effectiveness but also strengthens their position as key contributors to institutional and societal goals.

*Implications for Policymakers* - Policymakers have a critical role in shaping the broader educational landscape by advocating for systemic changes that prioritize teaching quality. By integrating SoTL principles into national education policies, policymakers can elevate the status of teaching as a scholarly endeavour. Funding allocations for SoTL initiatives, frameworks for evaluating teaching excellence, and incentives for educators to engage in pedagogical research are essential measures. Additionally, policies that address the disparities between teaching and research expectations, particularly for FLT)s in resource-limited settings, can create equitable opportunities for professional development and innovation.

## Conclusion

This conceptual paper presents an integrated framework that positions SoTL competence as a transformative force in the professional development and effectiveness of FLT)s. Drawing on Institutional Theory and the Pedagogy of Learning, the study highlights the interplay of institutional and pedagogical factors in shaping FLT)s' professional identity and commitment. The framework emphasizes how SoTL principles such as reflective inquiry, methodological rigor, collaboration with students, and public dissemination act as catalysts for innovation in teaching and learning.

By situating FLT)s as the focal point, the study addresses critical gaps in the literature and provides valuable insights into the unique challenges of foreign language instruction. The proposed conceptual model not only underscores the potential of SoTL competence to enhance teaching practices but also highlights its broader implications for institutional policies and educational reform.

## Future Research Directions

Future research can build on this framework by exploring the following areas (Siddiq et al., 2024):

- *Empirical Validation:* Conducting qualitative and quantitative studies to test the proposed relationships between SoTL competence, institutional factors, and FLT)s' professional identity and commitment.
- *Contextual Variations:* Investigating how SoTL practices vary across different cultural, linguistic, and institutional contexts, particularly in non-native language environments.
- *Impact on Student Outcomes:* Examining the direct impact of FLT)s' SoTL practices on student learning outcomes.

and engagement in diverse language learning settings.

- **Policy Interventions:** Evaluating the effectiveness of policies aimed at fostering SoTL competence in improving teaching quality and institutional performance.

By advancing these areas, future research can deepen the understanding of SoTL as a powerful tool for driving educational innovation and achieving sustainable development goals in higher education.

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