

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Teaching Quality–Driven Transformative Learning: A Narrative Review and Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Student Satisfaction in Chinese Private Universities

Xiaojun Jiang, Muhammad Syawal Bin Amran*, Faridah Binti Mydin Kuty

Faculty of Education, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, Lingkungan Ilmu, 43600 Bangi, Selangor, Malaysia

* **Corresponding author:** Muhammad Syawal Bin Amran, syawal@ukm.edu.my

ABSTRACT

Background: The growing emphasis on teaching quality in higher education has intensified interest in understanding its role in shaping students' learning experiences, particularly within Chinese private universities. Alongside teaching quality, student satisfaction and critical reflection are increasingly recognized as essential indicators of effective teaching and meaningful learning. However, the relationships among these constructs remain insufficiently examined in the context of China's private higher education sector.

Purpose and methods: This study aims to explore the relationships among teaching quality, critical reflection, and student satisfaction, identify key influencing factors, and develop a conceptual framework grounded in existing literature. This research adopted a four-step method aiming to define the research scope, synthesize relevant literature, identify core constructs, and propose a conceptual framework.

Results: The synthesis of the included studies indicates that teaching quality—including teaching content, teaching methods, teaching conditions, and teaching management—functions as a foundational determinant of student satisfaction. The findings further suggest that critical reflection operates as a central mediating mechanism through which instructional quality translates into meaningful evaluative outcomes. Additionally, gender and disciplinary major appear to condition the strength of these relationships.

Conclusion: By integrating the Teaching Quality Model with Transformative Learning Theory, the proposed framework advances understanding of student satisfaction beyond linear instructional effects and emphasizes cognitive transformation as a key explanatory process. The model provides a theoretically grounded basis for future empirical validation and offers practical guidance for private universities seeking to enhance student satisfaction through reflective, student-centered pedagogical strategies rather than solely procedural improvements.

Keywords: Teaching Quality; Student Satisfaction; Critical reflection; Chinese Private Universities; Higher Education

1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, China's higher education system has expanded rapidly under the combined influence of massification policies and increasing societal demand for tertiary education^[1]. Within this

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transformation, private higher education institutions have gradually assumed a more prominent role by supplementing public universities and expanding access to higher education^[2]. Through flexible enrollment mechanisms and diversified educational offerings, private universities have contributed to accommodating the growing number of students seeking postsecondary education^[3,4]. Nevertheless, despite their expanding scale and visibility, private institutions continue to face structural challenges, including constrained financial resources, low students' satisfaction, weaker social recognition, and uneven academic quality, all of which intensify competition for student recruitment and retention^[5].

In this increasingly competitive environment, teaching quality has become a central determinant of the sustainable development of private universities in China^[6,7]. Teaching quality not only influences students' academic performance and professional competence, but also affects institutional credibility, graduate employability, and long-term competitiveness^[8,9]. Compared with public universities, private institutions often lack historical prestige and stable public funding, making improvements in teaching and learning quality particularly critical^[10]. As a result, enhancing teaching quality has shifted from being a pedagogical concern to a strategic priority for private higher education institutions.

Beyond objective measures of instructional effectiveness, student satisfaction has gained recognition as a key indicator of higher education quality^[11]. Student satisfaction reflects students' holistic evaluations of teaching practices, learning environments, academic support, and overall educational experiences^[12]. Previous research suggests that higher levels of student satisfaction are associated with stronger learning motivation, deeper academic engagement, and greater persistence^[13]. From this perspective, student satisfaction can be understood not only as an outcome of teaching quality, but also as a mechanism through which students experience and evaluate teaching quality^[14]. However, the role of student satisfaction in shaping broader learning outcomes has not yet been sufficiently examined, particularly within private higher education contexts.

Another important yet underexplored dimension of teaching quality is critical reflection, which is commonly regarded as a core component of critical reflection in higher education^[15]. Critical reflection enables students to analyze information, evaluate assumptions, and engage in reflective judgment, skills that are essential in complex and rapidly changing social and professional environments^[16]. Existing studies indicate that active learning strategies and reflective pedagogies can foster students' critical reflection. However, research on the development of critical reflection in private universities remains limited, and its relationship with teaching quality and student satisfaction has rarely been examined in an integrated manner.

Existing higher education satisfaction models primarily conceptualize student satisfaction as a function of service quality, institutional support, or teaching effectiveness. However, these models largely treat satisfaction as an immediate evaluative response rather than as an outcome of cognitive transformation processes. While prior studies have separately examined teaching quality, critical reflection, and satisfaction, few have theoretically specified the cognitive mechanism linking instructional structures to evaluative outcomes, particularly within the context of Chinese private universities.

This study addresses this gap by repositioning student satisfaction as a cognitively mediated outcome grounded in Transformative Learning Theory, proposing that critical reflection serves as the explanatory mechanism translating teaching quality into meaningful evaluative judgments. Specifically, the study seeks to examine students' perceptions of teaching quality, explore the association between teaching quality and student satisfaction, and analyze how critical reflection relates to both constructs. By integrating these dimensions, this research seeks to provide a more comprehensive understanding of teaching quality in

private higher education, thereby offering theoretical insights and practical implications for institutional improvement and teaching reform.

2. Theory Constructs (Literature Review)

2.1. The Current Landscape and Challenges of Private Higher Education in China

Over the past two decades, China's higher education system has expanded on an unprecedented scale, largely as a result of policies promoting mass participation and sustained growth in demand for tertiary education^[17]. Within this system, public universities have continued to occupy a dominant position, supported by long-standing governmental investment, policy protection, and established institutional reputations. These conditions have enabled public institutions to maintain advantages in areas such as faculty development, research output, and academic standing^[18]. At the same time, private higher education institutions have gradually developed as a complementary sector, contributing to increased enrolment capacity and a more diversified institutional landscape^[19].

However, the expansion of private higher education has not been without difficulty. Compared with public universities, private institutions generally operate under tighter financial constraints and rely heavily on tuition revenue, which can limit long-term investment in academic development. Difficulties in attracting and retaining qualified faculty members remain a persistent concern^[20,21]. In addition, variations in regulatory oversight and internal quality assurance have contributed to uneven academic standards across institutions. These challenges have become more pronounced in recent years due to demographic changes and intensified competition for student enrolment, increasing the pressure on private universities to demonstrate educational effectiveness and institutional credibility^[22].

2.2. Student Development in Private Universities: Current Conditions and Limitations

Student development is widely regarded as a central objective of higher education and an important indicator of teaching quality. In the context of private universities, patterns of student development appear to be shaped by a combination of institutional constraints and market-oriented priorities^[23]. Previous studies suggest that many private institutions place considerable emphasis on practical skills and employability-related training, reflecting both labour market expectations and students' concerns about career outcomes. While such an orientation may yield short-term employment benefits, it may also restrict opportunities for sustained intellectual inquiry and deeper forms of learning^[24].

Empirical research further indicates that students in private universities may experience relatively limited academic support and fewer opportunities to engage in inquiry-based or research-oriented learning^[25]. In some cases, teaching practices remain largely lecture-driven, with less emphasis on active participation, reflective engagement, or the development of independent thinking skills. As a result, student development within private universities may be uneven, particularly in areas related to higher-order cognitive abilities. These observations point to the need for closer examination of how instructional practices and learning environments influence students' academic growth in private higher education settings^[26].

2.3. The Impact of Teaching quality on Student Outcomes

Teaching quality is commonly understood as a multidimensional concept encompassing teaching practices, curriculum structure, learning environments, and institutional support^[27]. A substantial body of literature has linked higher levels of teaching quality to improved academic performance, stronger engagement with learning, and more favourable long-term outcomes. Teaching that is perceived as clear, coherent, and intellectually engaging has been shown to encourage deeper approaches to learning and more consistent academic effort^[28].

Beyond academic performance alone, teaching quality also appears to shape students' attitudes toward learning, including their motivation, confidence, and willingness to persist when faced with challenges^[29]. When instructional experiences are perceived as meaningful and well-organized, students tend to engage more actively and sustain their commitment to learning. For private universities, where institutional reputation and competitiveness are closely tied to student outcomes, the perceived quality of education may play a particularly influential role^[30]. Consequently, attention to teaching quality remains a critical concern for institutions seeking to enhance both student development and organizational standing.

2.4. The Role of Student Satisfaction in Shaping Student Outcomes

Student satisfaction has increasingly been discussed as an important indicator of higher education effectiveness^[31]. Rather than representing a simple affective response, student satisfaction reflects students' broader evaluations of their learning experiences, including perceptions of teaching, academic support, and the overall learning environment^[32]. Empirical research has consistently suggested that higher levels of satisfaction are associated with stronger engagement, greater institutional attachment, and improved retention.

At the same time, student satisfaction is not merely an outcome of educational processes but also appears to influence how students respond to their learning experiences^[33]. When students feel that instruction is supportive and responsive to their needs, they are more likely to invest effort, persist through difficulties, and adopt positive learning attitudes. In private universities, where student choice and continuation are especially consequential, satisfaction may therefore function as a key mechanism linking teaching quality to learning outcomes^[34]. Understanding this role is essential for evaluating educational effectiveness in private higher education contexts^[35].

2.5. The Influence of Critical reflection on Student Learning and Development

Critical reflection, including elements of critical reflection, analytical reasoning, and evaluative judgment, is widely recognized as a central outcome of higher education. It enables students to engage with knowledge in a more reflective and analytical manner, rather than relying solely on memorization or surface learning^[36]. Research suggests that students who demonstrate stronger critical reflection skills are more likely to adopt deep learning strategies, exercise academic autonomy, and apply knowledge flexibly in unfamiliar situations.

Pedagogical approaches that emphasize active learning, reflection, and student-centered instruction have been shown to support the development of critical reflection. However, opportunities to cultivate these abilities vary considerably across institutional contexts. In private universities, constraints related to curriculum design, teaching practices, and assessment structures may limit systematic attention to critical reflection development^[37]. Given its importance for both academic growth and long-term adaptability, examining critical reflection alongside teaching quality and student satisfaction is necessary for a more comprehensive understanding of teaching quality.

2.6. Other Variables Influencing Student Performance

In addition to teaching quality, student satisfaction, and critical reflection, student performance is shaped by a range of other factors. Prior studies have highlighted the roles of learning engagement, self-regulated learning, institutional support, and learning environments in influencing academic outcomes. Individual characteristics, including prior academic preparation and learning motivation, further interact with institutional conditions to shape students' learning experiences^[33].

While acknowledging the relevance of these factors, attempting to account for all possible influences may complicate the analysis of core educational relationships. For this reason, the present study focuses on

teaching quality, student satisfaction, and critical reflection as central constructs through which teaching quality is experienced in private higher education^[12]. Situating these variables within the broader literature on student performance allows for a focused yet theoretically informed examination of how teaching quality may be enhanced in private universities.

2.7. Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory, originally developed by Mezirow, provides a robust theoretical lens for explaining how instructional experiences lead to perspective transformation through critical reflection. According to Mezirow, meaningful learning occurs when individuals encounter a “disorienting dilemma” that challenges existing assumptions and prompts reflective reassessment of previously held meaning perspectives. Through rational discourse, dialogue, and critical self-examination, learners reconstruct their interpretive frameworks, resulting in perspective transformation rather than incremental knowledge acquisition^[38].

Within higher education settings, high-quality teaching practices—particularly those characterized by dialogic engagement, analytical challenge, and structured feedback—can create conditions analogous to disorienting dilemmas. When students are encouraged to question assumptions, justify reasoning, and engage in reflective discourse, instructional experiences extend beyond content delivery and become catalysts for cognitive restructuring. In this sense, teaching quality does not merely transmit knowledge; it shapes the epistemic conditions under which learners reinterpret meaning^[39].

Applying Transformative Learning Theory to private higher education contexts is particularly appropriate because many institutional reforms focus on structural or administrative improvements. While such reforms may enhance procedural clarity, they do not automatically produce perspective transformation. By integrating Transformative Learning Theory into the teaching quality–satisfaction relationship, the present framework specifies the cognitive pathway through which instructional structures generate meaningful educational evaluation. Critical reflection thus functions not as a peripheral outcome but as the central mechanism linking instructional architecture to student satisfaction.

3. Research Method

3.1. Research Design and Review Method

This research adopted a four-step method to propose a conceptual framework through a comprehensive literature review to investigate the relationship among variables including teaching quality, students’ satisfaction, critical reflection and transformative learning theory^[40]. The method is illustrated in Figure 1. The first step involves identifying the research context and target cases, focusing on identifying the teaching situation in Chinese private university. Understanding the current situation is crucial to conceptual framework development^[41,42].

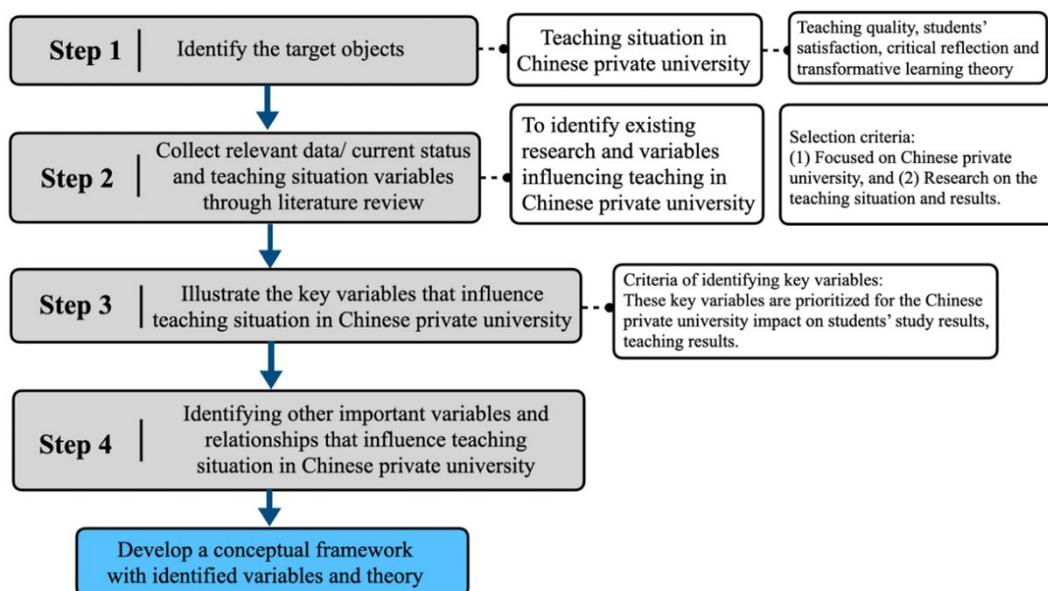


Figure 1. Four-step method diagram (Adapted from Jinglong, Me, Ahmad, et al. (2024) and Zhu et al. (2024))

The second step entails conducting a structured literature review using the “Literature Review Synthesis Process”^[43] to collect relevant concepts, variables, and theoretical underpinnings. Following Ibrahim’s construct categorization technique, the research question and search string are broken into four constructs in Table 1: WHO (Chinese private university), WHAT (Teaching quality, student satisfaction and critical reflection), HOW1 (Teaching variables), HOW2 (Teaching results).

Table 1. Search strings used in the study. (Source: author’s own analysis)

Database	Search String
Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science (WOS), Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)	(“Chinese private universit*” OR “non-governmental universit*” OR “privately-funded university*” OR “non-state universit*”) AND (“teach* quality” OR “student* satisfaction” OR “critical reflection”) AND (“teach* result*” OR “teach* outcome*” OR “learn* result*” OR “learn* outcome*”)

Based on those constructs, five thematic areas were defined to guide article selection and collection at the initial stage, the proposed themes’ numbers and titles are adjustable after the final results: a) The current teaching situation in Chinese private university; b) The development and application of transformative learning theory in Chinese private university; c) The influence of teaching quality in Chinese private university; d) The influence of student satisfaction in Chinese private university; e) The influence of critical reflection in Chinese private university. A systematic search was conducted in Google Scholar, Scopus, Web of Science (WOS) and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), and used combinations of the following keywords: (“Chinese private universit*” OR “non-governmental universit*” OR “privately-funded university*” OR “non-state universit*”) AND (“teach* quality” OR “student* satisfaction” OR “critical reflection”). The search was limited to peer-reviewed articles from 2016-2025. Initial search results 116 relevant publications were collected, the searching results from each database were listed in Table 2.

Table 2. Search strings from Google Scholar, Scopus, WoS, ERIC

Google Scholar	("Chinese private universit*" OR "non-governmental universit*" OR "privately-funded university*" OR "non-state universit*" OR "private universit*") AND ("teach* quality" OR "student* satisfaction" OR "critical reflection")	9 results
SCOPUS	TITLE-ABS-KEY ("Chinese private universit*" OR "non-governmental universit*" OR "privately-funded university*" OR "non-state universit*" OR "private universit*") AND TITLE-ABS-KEY ("teach* quality" OR "student* satisfaction" OR "critical reflection")	52 results
WoS	("Chinese private universit*" OR "non-governmental universit*" OR "privately-funded university*" OR "non-state universit*" OR "private universit*") AND ("teach* quality" OR "student* satisfaction" OR "critical reflection")	43 results
ERIC	"Chinese private university" OR "non-governmental university" OR "privately-funded university" OR "non-state university" OR "private university" AND "teaching quality" OR "student satisfaction" OR "critical reflection"	12 results

The inclusion criteria were as follows: (1) focus on Chinese private university and (2) research on the teaching situation and results. The exclusion criteria were as follows: (1) studies focused on public university or out of Chinese university; (2) research range out of teaching and study; (3) publications not written in English; (4) secondary sources, including review papers, opinion articles, editorials, or perspective pieces; (5) grey literature, such as these, dissertations, unpublished reports, or conference proceedings and (6) no available full text. The articles' screening flowchart is presented in Figure 2. A total of 116 articles were initially identified through a systematic search, of which 18 duplicate records were removed, leaving 98 articles for screening. The first stage involved title screening, after which 45 articles with irrelevant titles were excluded from the review. Subsequently, 53 articles with abstracts that did not align with the research focus were removed, resulting in the exclusion of 18 papers. The remaining 35 articles were evaluated according to the inclusion and exclusion criteria, leading to the removal of 14 articles. Finally, 21 articles met the eligibility criteria and were included in this review.

The third step involves identifying the key variables influencing the relationships among the variables and related theory, including teaching quality, student satisfaction, critical reflection and transformative learning theory in Chinese private university from the reviewed literature. Finally, the conceptual framework is developed by mapping these variables and their interrelationships, providing a conceptual framework of how teaching quality, student satisfaction, critical reflection and transformative learning theory contribute to strengthening the teaching situation in Chinese private university. This methodology ensures a systematic and theory-driven approach to conceptual framework development, grounded in both the learning theory, variables and the realities of the Chinese private university.

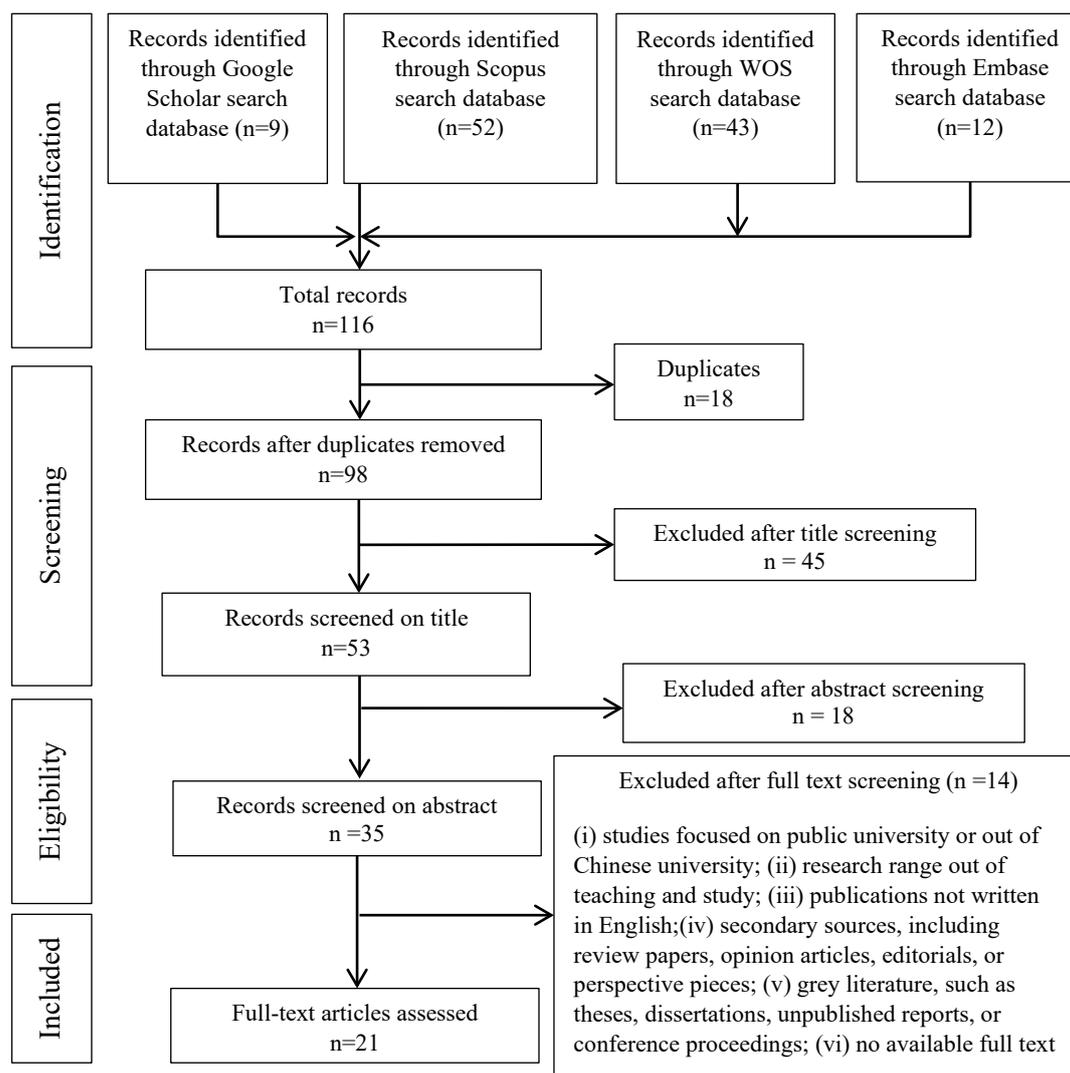


Figure 2. Flow chart of search strategy based on PRISMA flow diagram

4. Results and Framework Development

4.1. Results

Following the screening and eligibility assessment process, a total of 21 studies were selected for in-depth synthesis as Table 3 listed. These studies collectively examine teaching quality, student satisfaction, reflective learning processes, and contextual influences within higher education settings, with particular relevance to Chinese private universities and comparable institutional contexts. The selected articles span empirical quantitative studies, qualitative case analyses, and conceptual discussions, providing a multidimensional evidence base for framework development. A thematic analysis of the 21 studies reveals four dominant clusters: (1) The current teaching quality in Chinese private universities, (2) The development and application of transformative learning theory in Chinese private university, (3) The influence of teaching quality and student satisfaction in Chinese private university, (4) The influence of critical reflection and student satisfaction in Chinese private university, and (5) Other variables that influence students' satisfaction in Chinese private university.

Table 3. List of included studies and their categories

Author	Category
Godson et al. (2023)	Teaching Quality- Structural/ Managerial
Wang & Zhang (2016)	Teaching Quality- Structural/ Managerial
Gao (2016)	Teaching Quality- Structural/ Managerial
Anh et al. (2021)	Teaching Quality- Structural/ Managerial
Liang, Abdullah, & Wang (2025)	Teaching Quality- Structural/ Managerial
Pasin & Delgado (2017)	Teaching Quality- Pedagogical/Interactive
Solihati & Mulyono (2017)	Teaching Quality- Pedagogical/Interactive
Peng et al. (2017)	Teaching Quality- Pedagogical/Interactive
Zaky (2021)	Teaching Quality- Pedagogical/Interactive
Ikram, Kenayathulla, & Saleem (2025)	Teaching Quality- Pedagogical/Interactive
Lozada & Johnson (2019)	Critical reflection / Transformative Learning
Lamas & Vargas-D'Uniam (2016)	Critical reflection / Transformative Learning
Jonathans, Widiati, & Sulisty (2025)	Critical reflection / Transformative Learning
Wang et al. (2024)	Critical reflection / Transformative Learning
Kanduri & Radha (2023)	Student Satisfaction
Xia, Feng, & Wang (2023)	Student Satisfaction
Olórtogui-Alcalde et al. (2025)	Student Satisfaction
Nhan et al. (2022)	Student Satisfaction
Arrona-Palacios, Okoye, & Camacho-Zuñiga (2020)	Moderating Variables (Gender)
Hysa & Rehman (2019)	Moderating Variables (Major/Discipline)
Nweke-Love et al. (2025)	Moderating / Institutional Context

4.1.1. The current teaching quality in Chinese private universities

Across the reviewed studies, teaching quality consistently emerges as a primary determinant of students' academic experience; however, closer examination shows clear variation in how “teaching quality” is conceptualized and operationalized. Studies focusing on institutional governance and quality assurance tend to emphasize formal systems, standards, and managerial arrangements as indicators of quality^[44,45]. In Chinese private higher education specifically, structural challenges such as uneven academic standards, staffing pressures, and institutional positioning can shape how teaching quality is enacted and evaluated^[46,47]. This stream implies that teaching quality is frequently understood through an organizational or managerial lens, where improving quality is closely tied to strengthening processes, oversight, and consistency.

In contrast, another body of work conceptualizes teaching quality through classroom-level teaching and learning processes, including interaction intensity, active learning design, and the quality of teacher–student engagement. Evidence from blended or hybrid learning contexts suggests that interactive modalities and well-designed learning activities can enhance perceived teaching effectiveness and learning experience, emphasizing pedagogical depth rather than administrative adequacy^[48,49]. Similarly, student-centered engagement patterns (e.g., multi-engagement learning approaches) indicate that “quality” is often experienced through instructional stimulation and participation opportunities rather than through management alone^[50].

Taken together, these perspectives suggest a structural strength–pedagogical depth gap: private universities may improve organization and governance, yet still struggle to consistently embed intellectually stimulating pedagogy that supports deeper learning. This helps explain why quality reforms sometimes raise baseline satisfaction but do not necessarily produce transformative learning outcomes. Such a gap provides a strong rationale for integrating a transformative learning lens—especially critical reflection—into teaching quality discussions as a mechanism that translates instructional conditions into meaningful learning experiences^[51,52].

4.1.2. The development and application of transformative learning theory in Chinese private university

Transformative perspectives emphasize that learning becomes meaningfully developmental when students experience perspective change through reflective processing of experience. In practice, studies that examine perspective transformation demonstrate that reflection-driven learning can move beyond skill acquisition and encourage deeper reinterpretation of assumptions and learning identities^[51]. However, the reviewed evidence indicates that reflective and transformative elements are often implemented unevenly: reflective activities may appear as isolated tasks (e.g., portfolios) rather than being structurally embedded across curricula and assessment systems^[52]. This pattern suggests that reflective learning is frequently treated as an add-on rather than an organizing principle of teaching design.

Moreover, pedagogical interventions that support active interaction—particularly in blended/hybrid contexts—are more likely to create conditions conducive to reflective engagement, because they provide repeated opportunities for dialogue, feedback cycles, and learner agency^[48,49]. Yet this does not automatically guarantee transformative outcomes: without intentional scaffolding (e.g., guided reflection prompts, structured discourse, formative feedback), reflection can remain superficial and fail to generate sustained cognitive change. This may help explain why transformative practices appear more visible in some learning designs than others, and why the link between teaching quality and deeper learning remains inconsistent across settings.

Accordingly, positioning critical reflection as a core mechanism within the teaching quality–satisfaction relationship is not merely theoretical; it responds to an implementation gap identified across practice-oriented interventions, portfolio-based reflection, and perspective transformation studies^[51,52,53].

4.1.3. The influence of teaching quality and student satisfaction in Chinese private university

The association between teaching quality and student satisfaction is widely reported, but comparative findings suggest that the magnitude of influence depends on which aspects of “quality” are emphasized. Studies focused on service delivery, institutional support, and student-facing provisions often find that satisfaction increases when students perceive responsiveness and adequate learning support; however, these gains can reflect service quality rather than deeper instructional effectiveness^[54,55]. Likewise, research examining technology usage and learning supports suggests that satisfaction may rise when learning becomes more convenient or efficient, even if cognitive depth is not substantially improved^[56,57].

In contrast, studies emphasizing interactive pedagogy and active learning design more consistently link satisfaction to meaningful learning experience and engagement quality. For example, blended/hybrid instructional designs and structured interaction can enhance perceived teaching effectiveness and student learning experience, which tends to align more closely with satisfaction rooted in learning value rather than in administrative convenience^[48,49]. Satisfaction outcomes also appear connected to broader academic success mechanisms, where satisfaction functions as a pathway through which teaching and learning conditions translate into persistence and performance^[50,58].

These contrasts imply that teaching quality cannot be treated as a uniform predictor of satisfaction. Improvements that primarily enhance management or delivery may raise baseline satisfaction, but pedagogical qualities that strengthen interaction, feedback, and learning meaning are more likely to produce robust satisfaction. This reinforces the value of a multidimensional teaching quality model and supports examining the cognitive pathway (reflection) through which pedagogical quality becomes personally meaningful to learners.

4.1.4. The influence of critical reflection and student satisfaction in Chinese private university

Although reflective capability is frequently discussed as an outcome, fewer studies treat it as an explanatory mechanism linking teaching conditions to student satisfaction. Evidence from reflective portfolios and reflective practice research indicates that reflection is associated with professional growth, self-efficacy development, and learning self-regulation, all of which can strengthen students' positive evaluation of their educational experience^[52,53]. Perspective transformation studies similarly suggest that when learning experiences trigger reinterpretation of assumptions and identity-level meaning making, students are more likely to report educational value that goes beyond immediate course satisfaction^[59].

However, much empirical work reports parallel associations—teaching quality relates to satisfaction, and teaching design relates to reflection—without testing the structural pathway connecting them. This leaves a conceptual fragmentation: reflection is recognized as desirable, but its mediating role remains under-specified and under-tested. Studies showing that interactive learning designs increase engagement and learning experience provide indirect support for the mediation logic, because interaction and feedback create repeated opportunities for reflective processing, which can then shape satisfaction^[60].

Therefore, treating critical reflection as a mediating mechanism is analytically useful: it explains why administrative improvements may not translate into high satisfaction if students do not experience cognitive growth, and why pedagogical interaction can yield stronger satisfaction when it produces reflective learning and meaning-making^[61].

4.1.5. Other variables that influence students' satisfaction in Chinese private university

Demographic and disciplinary variables show nuanced and sometimes inconsistent patterns across studies, suggesting they operate more as contextual conditions than as direct determinants. Evidence addressing gender effects indicates that gender can shape how students evaluate teaching and how evaluation patterns emerge, but the direction and magnitude of gender effects may vary across contexts and disciplines^[62]. Disciplinary major likewise shapes expectations of pedagogy and evaluation criteria; for example, field-specific studies on teaching quality assessment in economics illustrate that what counts as “good teaching” can differ depending on disciplinary norms and learning goals. Studies using peer assessment to evaluate online teaching quality also imply that evaluation criteria are sensitive to learning context and course design, which may interact with students' disciplinary experiences^[63].

In the Chinese private university context, these variables matter because students' expectations are shaped by major-specific employability orientation and institutional positioning, meaning the same teaching conditions may be interpreted differently across groups^[64]. Consequently, gender and major are best conceptualized as moderators that shape how teaching quality dimensions and reflective learning experiences translate into satisfaction, rather than as independent predictors of satisfaction.

4.2. Proposed Conceptual Framework

Drawing upon the systematic synthesis and critical analysis of the reviewed literature, the present study proposes a Teaching Quality–Driven Transformative Learning Conceptual Framework to explain how

instructional structures influence student satisfaction within Chinese private universities as shown in Figure 3. The framework integrates the multidimensional Teaching Quality Model with Transformative Learning Theory to provide a comprehensive explanation of both structural and cognitive mechanisms underlying student evaluative outcomes.

Within this framework, teaching quality is conceptualized as a multidimensional instructional system consisting of teaching content, teaching methods, teaching conditions, and teaching management^[47]. These dimensions collectively represent the structural architecture of instructional practice in private higher education contexts. Teaching content reflects the coherence, relevance, and intellectual depth of curriculum design. Teaching methods capture the pedagogical strategies employed, including interaction, feedback, and dialogic engagement. Teaching conditions refer to the institutional and environmental support structures that facilitate learning, while teaching management encompasses organizational clarity, fairness of assessment, and classroom governance. Rather than treating teaching quality as a singular construct, the framework acknowledges that these dimensions may exert differentiated influences on students' experiences. In particular, pedagogical interaction and intellectual stimulation are likely to generate stronger cognitive engagement than purely administrative improvements, although all four dimensions jointly shape instructional perception.

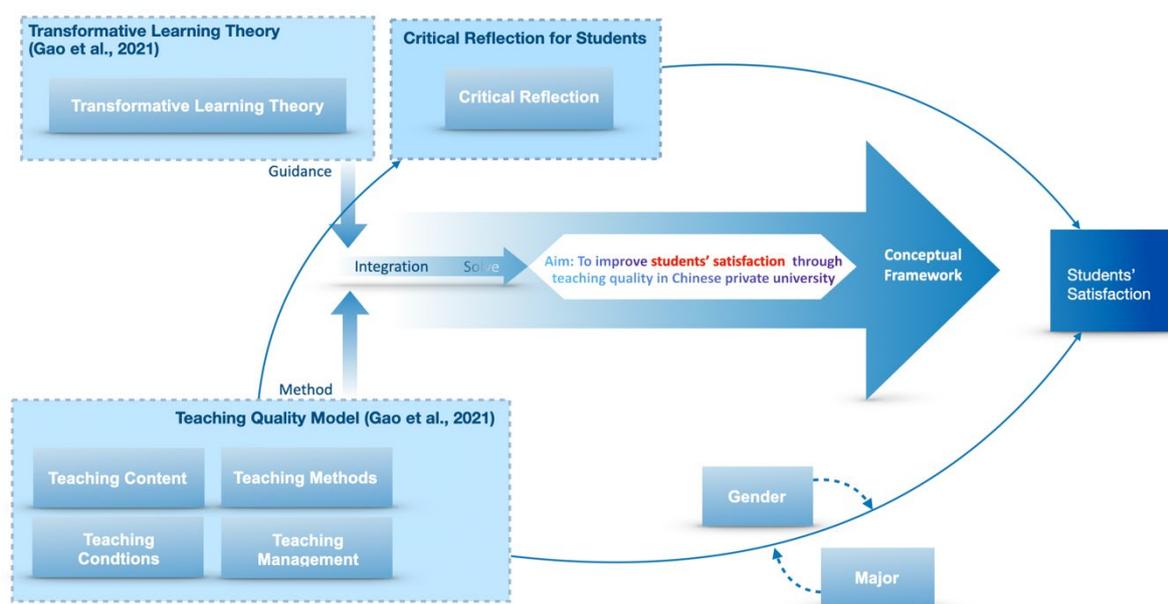


Figure 3. Teaching Quality–Driven Transformative Learning Conceptual Framework for Enhancing Student Satisfaction in Chinese Private Universities

Teaching quality is therefore positioned as the foundational antecedent within the model. Consistent with prior empirical findings, structured and well-managed instructional environments contribute directly to student satisfaction by enhancing perceptions of clarity, fairness, and academic value. However, the framework moves beyond a purely direct-effect model by incorporating a cognitive mediating mechanism grounded in Transformative Learning Theory.

According to Mezirow's theory, meaningful learning occurs when individuals engage in critical reflection, reassessing assumptions and reconstructing interpretive frameworks. Within the context of private universities, high-quality teaching practices—particularly those involving dialogic methods, analytical tasks, and intellectually challenging content—create conditions that stimulate reflective engagement. Critical

reflection thus functions as the core cognitive process translating instructional quality into transformative learning experiences. When students perceive that teaching has enabled them to think independently, question assumptions, and deepen understanding, their evaluation of the educational experience becomes more positive and meaningful.

Accordingly, student satisfaction is conceptualized as both a direct and indirect outcome of teaching quality. On one hand, effective instructional organization and supportive conditions contribute immediately to positive evaluative judgments. On the other hand, satisfaction is strengthened indirectly when teaching practices promote reflective growth. In this sense, critical reflection mediates the relationship between teaching quality and student satisfaction, serving as the explanatory bridge connecting structural instructional practices with affective evaluative outcomes. This mediated pathway addresses a limitation in prior research, which has often examined teaching quality and satisfaction in isolation without clarifying the cognitive processes linking them.

In addition to these direct and mediated relationships, the framework recognizes the contextual sensitivity of instructional effects. Gender and major are incorporated as moderating variables that may influence how teaching quality dimensions are interpreted and internalized. Empirical evidence suggests that students' disciplinary backgrounds shape expectations regarding pedagogical approaches, with applied majors often valuing experiential learning and theoretical majors emphasizing conceptual coherence. Similarly, gender differences may influence responsiveness to interactive or collaborative teaching environments. However, these variables do not consistently predict satisfaction independently of instructional quality. Instead, they condition the strength of relationships within the model, moderating how teaching quality influences critical reflection and satisfaction.

Overall, the proposed conceptual framework integrates structural, cognitive, and contextual dimensions to provide a comprehensive explanation of student satisfaction in Chinese private universities. By combining the Teaching Quality Model with Transformative Learning Theory, the framework advances understanding beyond direct-effect assumptions and highlights the central role of critical reflection in transforming instructional quality into meaningful educational evaluation. While the model assumes directional relationships grounded in established theory, it also allows for the possibility that heightened satisfaction may reinforce engagement behaviors, potentially strengthening reflective processes over time. Empirical validation is necessary to examine the stability and magnitude of these proposed pathways.

5. Discussion

The present study advances the literature by reconceptualizing student satisfaction in Chinese private universities as the outcome of a structurally and cognitively mediated process rather than as a direct evaluative reaction to instructional conditions. While prior research has consistently identified positive associations between teaching quality and student satisfaction, such relationships have often been treated as linear and immediate. By integrating the multidimensional Teaching Quality Model with Transformative Learning Theory, this study provides a more nuanced explanation of how instructional structures are translated into evaluative outcomes through cognitive transformation.

First, the framework extends existing teaching quality research by differentiating among four instructional dimensions—teaching content, teaching methods, teaching conditions, and teaching management—and situating them within a unified explanatory system. Rather than assuming uniform effects across dimensions, the analysis suggests that pedagogical and interactional elements, particularly those embedded in teaching methods, are more likely to stimulate reflective engagement and intellectual growth^[52].

This distinction contributes to the literature by clarifying why improvements in administrative or structural efficiency do not always yield proportionate increases in satisfaction. Satisfaction appears to be shaped not merely by procedural clarity, but by the degree to which teaching fosters meaningful cognitive development.

Second, the incorporation of critical reflection as a mediating construct deepens the theoretical understanding of teaching quality. Transformative Learning Theory posits that reflective reassessment of assumptions is central to meaningful learning. By positioning critical reflection as the mechanism linking teaching quality to satisfaction, the study reframes student satisfaction as partially rooted in perceived intellectual transformation^[47]. This perspective challenges instrumental interpretations of satisfaction that emphasize service delivery and instead highlights the cognitive dimension of educational evaluation. In doing so, the framework bridges structural models of teaching quality with learner-centered theories of cognitive development.

Third, the inclusion of gender and major as moderating variables enhances the contextual sensitivity of the model. Rather than attributing satisfaction differences directly to demographic characteristics, the framework recognizes that such variables condition how instructional practices are interpreted. Disciplinary norms and student background shape expectations of pedagogical style, thereby influencing the strength of relationships among teaching quality, reflection, and satisfaction^[60]. This moderated structure acknowledges heterogeneity within private university environments while avoiding deterministic explanations.

From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that institutional strategies aimed at enhancing student satisfaction should prioritize reflective pedagogy rather than solely focusing on procedural reforms. Investments in faculty development, dialogic teaching methods, formative feedback systems, and curriculum integration of reflective tasks may produce more sustainable improvements in student evaluation outcomes^[36]. For private universities operating within competitive educational markets, such cognitively grounded strategies may strengthen both academic reputation and institutional sustainability.

Nevertheless, the study remains conceptual and synthesizes existing evidence rather than presenting new empirical data. While the proposed relationships are theoretically coherent and supported by comparative analysis of prior research, empirical validation is necessary to test the magnitude and stability of the mediated and moderated pathways across diverse institutional contexts.

5.1. Distinction from Existing Higher Education Satisfaction Models

The proposed framework differs from established higher education satisfaction models in several important respects. Traditional service quality models, including adaptations of SERVQUAL in higher education, conceptualize student satisfaction primarily as a function of perceived service reliability, responsiveness, and institutional support. Although such models provide valuable insights into administrative and environmental dimensions of quality, they generally treat satisfaction as an evaluative reaction to performance indicators rather than as a cognitively mediated outcome.

Similarly, expectation–disconfirmation models emphasize the alignment between anticipated and perceived educational experiences. While these approaches explain evaluative discrepancies, they do not specify how instructional experiences shape learners’ internal meaning structures. Other educational situation quality frameworks incorporate classroom climate and motivation but stop short of theorizing reflection as the mechanism translating instructional processes into evaluative judgments.

This review more explicitly situates the framework within Mezirow’s Transformative Learning Theory, which conceptualizes learning as a process of critical reflection and perspective transformation. Rather than treating teaching quality solely as instructional effectiveness, the framework positions it as a catalyst for

disorienting dilemmas, reflective discourse, and the reconstruction of students' meaning perspectives. In the context of Chinese private universities, high-quality teaching—characterized by dialogic engagement, structured feedback, and cognitively challenging tasks—may foster critical reflection that mediates the relationship between teaching practices and student satisfaction. As this study is conceptual in nature, these linkages are theoretically inferred and warrant empirical validation in future research^[65].

In contrast, the present framework conceptualizes student satisfaction as partially rooted in reflective cognitive restructuring. By integrating Transformative Learning Theory, the model specifies critical reflection as the explanatory bridge between multidimensional teaching quality and satisfaction outcomes. This theoretically grounded mediation pathway distinguishes the framework from direct-effect and service-based models, repositioning satisfaction as an outcome influenced by intellectual transformation rather than solely by procedural efficiency or expectation alignment.

5.2. Boundary Conditions and Contextual Scope

The applicability of the proposed framework is shaped by contextual conditions characteristic of private higher education environments. The model is particularly relevant in institutional contexts where teaching quality varies across structural and pedagogical dimensions, and where managerial reforms emphasize quality assurance and competitiveness. In highly marketized private university systems, student satisfaction carries strategic significance for institutional sustainability, making the cognitive interpretation of instructional quality especially consequential. However, in public university systems with stable funding structures or in contexts where satisfaction is less directly linked to institutional survival, the magnitude of the proposed mediated relationships may differ. Accordingly, the framework should be understood as context-sensitive, with its strongest applicability in competitive, reform-oriented private higher education settings.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the interrelationships among teaching quality, critical reflection, and student satisfaction within Chinese private universities and proposed a Teaching Quality–Driven Transformative Learning Conceptual Framework. By integrating a multidimensional teaching quality model with Transformative Learning Theory, the study moves beyond linear assumptions and conceptualizes satisfaction as both a direct response to instructional structures and an indirect outcome mediated by reflective cognitive processes.

The analysis suggests that teaching content, methods, conditions, and management collectively shape students' instructional experience, but their influence on satisfaction is partly contingent upon the extent to which they stimulate critical reflection. In this framework, critical reflection serves as the central mechanism translating structural instructional quality into meaningful evaluative judgments. Furthermore, gender and major function as contextual moderators, influencing how instructional dimensions are perceived and internalized.

By synthesizing previously fragmented strands of literature, the proposed framework contributes a theoretically integrated explanation of teaching quality within private higher education settings. It shifts the focus from purely administrative efficiency toward cognitive transformation as a key driver of satisfaction, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of how teaching quality operates in practice.

Future research should empirically test the proposed mediated and moderated relationships using structural equation modeling and longitudinal designs to assess causal direction and stability over time. Additional studies may also examine how institutional resources, faculty development systems, and policy

environments interact with reflective pedagogical practices. Through such empirical validation, the framework can be further refined and adapted to support evidence-based improvement in private higher education.

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