

# Teaching English through English: Proficiency, Pedagogy and Performance

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## Abstract

Most of the world's English language teachers speak English as a second or third language rather than as their first language. For many, their level of proficiency in English may not reach benchmarks established by their employers, raising the issue that is the focus of this article, namely, what kind of proficiency in English is necessary to be an effective teacher of English? The article seeks to provide an overview of how the role of language proficiency issue has been addressed in the ELT literature. It describes the kind of specialized language skills needed to teach English through English, explores the relationship between language proficiency and teaching ability, considers the impact of language ability on different dimensions of teaching, and raises the implications for language assessment and for the design of language enhancement programmes for language teachers.

## Keywords

Teaching English through English, teachers' language proficiency, non-native teachers of English, language proficiency and teaching ability, teacher Education

One consequence of the dominant status of English in many countries is the growing demand for knowledgeable, skillful, and effective teachers of English. The introduction of English at primary level, the use of CLIL in some contexts where subject-teachers teach part of their courses in English, and the expanding role of private language teaching institutes has created opportunities for English teachers as well as problems in providing sufficient suitably qualified teachers to meet the demand. Young et al., (2014: 1) observe: 'For students at the elementary and secondary school levels, access to teachers who have the necessary professional knowledge and functional English language skills to teach English effectively is critical'. This is not a recent development. As Andrews commented more than a decade ago: 'the burgeoning demand for English worldwide has

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led to a demand for teachers that can be met in the short term only by employing in that role significant numbers of people who lack the appropriate qualifications' (Andrews, 2003: 82). For Andrews, 'qualifications' included subject-matter-knowledge (knowledge about language) as well as language proficiency (knowledge of language). A media report cited in Butler (2004) for example, stated that in Seoul, South Korea alone at that time, there were some 10,000 English teachers in elementary and high schools, and that less than 8% had sufficient English to be able to teach effectively in English. (Information is not available to confirm if the situation has changed since then). Limitations in language teachers' command of their teaching language is an issue that has been a concern in language teacher education for both teachers of English as well as those who teach other second or foreign languages (Elder, 2004; H. Richards, 2013). This article examines the nature of teaching English through English (or teaching a foreign language through a foreign language that the teacher may not be fluent in), explores the relationship between language proficiency and teaching ability, considers the impact of language ability on different dimensions of teaching, and raises the implications for language assessment and for the design on language enhancement programmes for language teachers.

## **Language and the Language Teacher's Professional Competence**

Competency in English language teaching draws on content or subject matter knowledge, teaching skills, and the ability to teach in English – a skill that is usually viewed as influenced by the teacher's language proficiency. According to conventional wisdom the more one knows of a language, the better prepared one is to teach it. Hence it is commonly assumed that a teacher who is a native speaker of his or her teaching language (English, French, Chinese etc.) is at an advantage compared to one who is not a native-speaker of the language – an assumption that Freeman (2016: 182) describes as the legacy in language teaching 'of the valuing of "nativeness" as a criterion for being a "good" language teacher', another aspect of what has been referred to as 'native-speakerism'. In the case of English, the teacher for whom English is not his or her first language is sometimes known as a *non-native English speaking teacher* or NNEST. The majority of the world's English teachers (80% according to Canajarah, 1999), are NNESTs, and while many are expert users of English, many are not, as is seen in these examples of teachers' written English. In the first the teacher (who is also a teacher trainer) was asked to describe why he chose to become an English teacher:

*I used to learn one of English teacher who taught in repeated method in his teaching, and I feel bored with his teaching subject so that I committed (sic) myself that I would be an English teacher and I would teacher better than him. In addition the need of human resource of English in my country is very important to involve with education sector to build up next generation.*

In the next example a high school English teacher explains what the term 'communicative approach' means to him:

*Communicative teaching approach refers to the teaching styles that teacher needs to teach students on how to communicate both in and outside the classroom. For example teachers has many types of teaching speaking by asking students to make presentation, role play, group discussion etc.*

Young et al., (2014: 3) characterize the language ability of many NNEST teachers such as those above:

These teachers may have only a basic command of general English – most likely at the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) A1 or A2 levels. They may use the local first language (L1) for a considerable proportion of the class period, either because of limitations of their own English proficiency (they are more comfortable and less embarrassed speaking in L1) or because they feel that their students may not understand them if they use English.

In the ELT literature, the teacher's command of English has been described as impacting a number of dimensions of teaching:

A teacher with a poor or hesitant command of spoken English will have difficulty with essential classroom teaching procedures such as giving instructions, asking questions on text, explaining the meaning of a word or replying to a student's question or remark .... A teacher without the requisite language skills will crucially lack authority and self-confidence in the classroom, and this will affect all aspects of his or her performance (Cullen, 2002: 220).

Mitchell (1988: 166) viewed language proficiency as the basis for the teacher's ability to engage in improvisational teaching:

No functional syllabus, "authentic" materials, or micro-computer programme can replace the capacity of the live, fluent speaker to hit upon topics of interest to particular individuals, continually adjust his/her speech to an appropriate level of difficulty and solve unpredictable communication problems from moment to moment, or to "scaffold" the learners at FL speech. In all this the teacher and his/her interactive skills are decisive.

The comments above are true of my own experience. I speak Indonesian and French but with limited ability in both. I could teach either language to beginners but due to my limited proficiency would be heavily dependent on the textbook and the audio and video components of the textbook. I could handle the presentation and practice phrases of the lesson but would have difficulty with the free-production phase and could not engage in improvisational teaching.

Comments such as those of Mitchell above also reflect the viewpoint – prevalent at the time and still widely held – that language proficiency (ideally referenced to that of the native speaker) is key to a teacher's ability to teach in a second or foreign language. Yet the present reality is that most of the world's language teachers do not have nor need a native-like ability in their teaching language to teach their language well: they need to be able to teach *with* the language, which is not the same thing and which is the focus of this article.

Language ability has also been linked to the teacher's sense of his or her professional identity: 'For non-native English teachers, language proficiency will always represent the bedrock of their professional confidence' (Murdoch, 1994: 254). Hence, teachers often see improvement in their language proficiency as central to their professional development as language teachers and to their identity as knowledgeable professionals:

*As a non-native English speaker I was worried about my language skills at first when I started to teach English... As the lessons progressed I became more confident in my teaching and I actually forgot that I was a non-native speaker of English while I was teaching because I became so engrossed (and interested) in delivering my lessons. (Raul C.; cited in Richards and Farrell, 2011: 5).*

As teachers gain experience in teaching and become more confident in using English to teach they come to assume an 'insider' identity as a language teacher (Pennington and Richards, 2016):

*Since I have been in teaching practice and inside teaching a real class with real ESL students I no longer feel an outsider in this profession even though I am a non-native speaker of English. Now that I have had a chance to prove myself as a teacher in front of these students and shown them that I know many different techniques as well as my skills using English (yes, and even if I still have a bit of an accent), they have begun to accept me as their teacher and I am beginning to feel more like a teacher of English (Momoko J.; cited in Richards and Farrell, 2011: 4).*

Young et al., comment that many teachers (2014: 3) 'recognize that their command of English is not fully adequate for their professional work, both for classroom teaching of English in English and for potential engagement with the global ELT community'. A study of foreign language teachers in Australia found that at that time, 40% of trainee teachers found their tertiary language learning experiences did not prepare them adequately for their role as language teachers (Elder, 1994: 8). More recent data is not available to confirm if the situation has changed. Similarly Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) found 72% of their non-native speaking graduate students described limitations in their language proficiency as impeding their teaching. A majority reported that they felt their language difficulties had an impact on their teaching practices. They considered native teachers to be accurate, fluent, and flexible and to be familiar with the intricacies of English and the use of colloquial, authentic English whereas nonnative teachers relied on textbooks, were aware of L1 transfer on learning and made use of L1 in the classroom. In a study of the teaching of English in elementary schools in Korea, Taiwan and Japan, Butler (2004) found teachers reported considerable gaps between their self-assessed language proficiency and the level they felt necessary to teach English effectively at elementary level. Research is needed to confirm if these observations still hold true.

Teachers' perceptions of their language proficiency also contributes to beliefs about their own effectiveness, known as teacher efficacy – that is their ability to effectively perform in their role as language teachers. Chacón (2005) examined the self-perceived efficacy of middle school English teachers in Venezuela and how this related to their self-reported English proficiency. Teachers' perceived efficacy was found to positively correlate with self-reported English proficiency. Similarly Eslami and Fatami (2008)

investigated the relationship between Iranian English teachers' perceptions of their self-efficacy in terms of their personal capabilities to teach English and their self-reported proficiency in English. They found:

a positive relationship between perceived level of language proficiency and sense of self-efficacy. The higher the teachers' perceived proficiency in language skills, the more efficacious they felt ... Moreover, the higher the teachers' sense of self-efficacy the more tendency they had to use communicative-based strategies in their classes and inclination to focus more on meaning rather than accuracy (2005: 265).

However, although the citations above confirm that language is an important aspect of how language teachers view their ability to use English or their teaching language to teach, the kind of proficiency needed to teach English through English (or to teach a foreign language through the medium of the language) is not so easy to characterize. It draws on three domains of knowledge and skill: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, and discourse skills, which we will now consider.

### **The Components of Teacher Expertise: Content Knowledge, Pedagogical Knowledge and Ability, and Discourse Skills**

Understanding the relationship between language proficiency and teaching ability has recently re-emerged as a focus in second language teacher education, particularly through work on teacher cognition and teaching knowledge (e.g. Freeman, 2002; Freeman, 2016; Freeman et al., 2015). As Freeman has observed, the ability to teach English through English requires consideration of a number of related issues, since in language teaching, language is both the content of teaching as well as the means by which it is taught. 'Unlike mathematics or other school subjects, in language classrooms, the medium becomes the message. Language in the classroom plays two roles simultaneously ... as the lesson content and as the means of teaching that content' (2016: 178). Three interrelated elements are involved in what Freeman (2016) refers to as *knowledge-for-teaching*, which we will call here content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge and ability, and discourse skills. The distinction between these three aspects of a teacher's knowledge and ability provides a useful analytic framework to help understand the nature of teaching English through English.

#### **Content Knowledge**

Content knowledge refers to the teachers' understanding of their teaching subject. In the case of English this includes a variety of sources of language-related knowledge that derive from those disciplines in which language is the object of study, such as linguistics, second language acquisition, sociolinguistics, and discourse analysis. (For convenience I am grouping together knowledge of subject content as well as knowledge of learning, which are often separated as in Freeman, 2016). From these and other sources, as part of their professional education teachers acquire a body of knowledge about their teaching

subject. However, there is no clear consensus in the TESOL profession as to what the essential content knowledge required by TESOL teachers should consist of. The kind of content courses teachers may be required to study generally reflects where they complete their graduate course and the interests and background of the academics who teach such courses. For example the core courses in the M.ED TESOL degree at the University of Sydney (2016) are *Discourse and Language Teaching*, *Second Language Acquisition*, *Methodology and Language Teaching*, *Literacy and Language Teaching*, *Language, Society and Power* while those in the MA English Studies (TESOL) degree at City University of Hong Kong (2106) are *Approaches to Language Teaching*, *Discourse Analysis*, *Dissertation*, *Language in its Social Context*, *Literary and Cultural Studies*, *Research Methods in English Studies*, *Second Language Acquisition*. While courses such as these may not have immediate practical application they are assumed to form part of the essential content or disciplinary knowledge language teachers are expected to know. An instructor on such a course commented: 'There is a body of encyclopaedic knowledge that an English teacher must know, even though ... it is of very little practical use' (Bartels, 2005: 75). Language-related knowledge of this kind has sometimes been referred to as 'language awareness' (Andrews, 2001) and this has traditionally referred to a teacher's knowledge of language systems, particularly grammar.

Content knowledge in itself does not provide a sufficient basis for the teaching of a language. A student majoring in linguistics might be skilled in the use of systemic functional grammar as a resource for the analysis of texts or have a good understanding of the nature of English phonology, however such knowledge would not enable him or her to know which aspects of English grammar or phonology are needed at different levels of language proficiency, nor how best to organize a syllabus to teach them and what teaching strategies could be used. In order to do this another source of knowledge is needed that we will call pedagogical knowledge and ability.

### *Pedagogical Knowledge and Ability*

This refers to the teacher's knowledge of teaching. It includes the teacher's subject matter knowledge, the repertoire of techniques and activities that the teacher employs in teaching together with the theories, beliefs, principles, values and ideas which are their source, sometimes referred to as pedagogical content knowledge, which Shulman suggested 'represents the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction' (Shulman, 1987: 8). Pedagogical knowledge and ability draws on content knowledge as well as other sources of knowledge but in the process transforms it, since it is understood in relation to knowledge of the learners, the curriculum, the teaching context and to teaching methods. For example as part of their content knowledge teachers might be expected to know the difference between tense and aspect in English or to know the difference between stative and non-stative verbs. Pedagogical knowledge and ability refers to what teachers know about how to communicate the difference between tense and aspect or between stative and non-stative verbs to learners. Andrews (2001) discusses a teacher who is well grounded in content knowledge (e.g. knowledge of the uses of *shall* and *will*) but lacks

the ability to present the distinction in a way that is comprehensible to her learners, i.e. she lacks pedagogical knowledge and ability. Andrews (2001: 76) also cites an example of a teacher who lacks both adequate content knowledge as well as pedagogical knowledge and ability in relation to teaching the passive:

It's easy if you ask them to rewrite the sentences, because they find it easy to follow. However ... they just don't know when we are supposed to use passive voice and when we are supposed to use active voice. And one of the students even asked me "Miss Wong, who do we have to use passive voice in our daily life?" And I find this question difficult to answer, ha, and I "Oh, I'll tell you next time..." And then I asked my colleagues "Why do we teach and use passive voice?" and no one can give me the correct answer. And then I go home and think about it. But even now I don't really know how to handle that student's questions. I finish the worksheets with them and they know how to rewrite the sentences. But I don't know how to explain them.

The distinction between content knowledge and pedagogical knowledge and ability has also been framed in terms of the distinction between declarative knowledge (knowledge *about* something) and procedural knowledge (the ability to *do* things), which Pasternak and Bailey (2004: 158) describe as entailing at least three areas:

1. Knowing about and how to use the target language.
2. Knowing about and how to teach in culturally appropriate way.
3. Knowing about and how to behave appropriately in the target language.

They give the following examples:

**Table 1.** Declarative Knowledge versus Procedural Knowledge.

|                                  | Examples of Declarative Knowledge   | Examples of Procedural Knowledge  |
|----------------------------------|---|---|
| <b>About the Target Language</b> | The ability to explain grammar rules and their exceptions.  | The ability to use grammar rules appropriately in speaking or writing.  |
| <b>About Teaching</b>            | The ability to explain the rationale for using jigsaw activities in communicative language teaching.      | Skill in setting up communicative jigsaw activities in pair work or group work.   |
| <b>About the Target Culture</b>  | The ability to explain norms of kinesics and proxemics used by members of the culture during interaction. | Being able to behave appropriately in terms of nonverbal behaviour and physical space when interacting with members of the culture. |

However, in a teacher education course the difference between content or declarative knowledge and pedagogical or procedural knowledge depends on how content is presented. For example a grammar course or a course on second language learning could be framed either as content knowledge or as pedagogical knowledge and textbooks on topics such as these vary according to which approach to the subject they take. (For e.g. compare the coverage in Ortega's and Spada and Lightbown's books on SLA: Ortega, 2013; Spada and Lightbown, 2013).

## Discourse Skills

The third element is the teacher's discourse skills in English and the extent to which this provides the means to teach English through English. This includes the ability to maintain communication in English that is fluent, accurate and comprehensible and more importantly, the extent to which the teacher can use English as a medium to teach English, particularly teachers who may be at Level A2 or B1 on the CEFR. What kind of English is this? Elder was one of the first to explore this question in depth drawing on needs analysis conducted by Viete (1998). Elder (1998) comments:

teacher language proficiency was far from being a well-defined domain relying on highly routinized language and a generally accepted phraseology such as is the case, with for example, air traffic controllers. Indeed, it was found to encompass everything that 'normal' language users might be expected to do in the contact of both formal and informal communication as well as a range of specialist skills. These specialist language skills include command of subject specific/metalinguistic terminology, on the one hand, and the discourse competence required for effective classroom delivery of subject content, on the other hand. Effective classroom delivery necessitates command of linguistic features. Directives are one such feature and are crucial in establishing classroom procedures and learning tasks. A range of questioning techniques is also essential if the teacher is able to monitor learning understanding. The teacher will also need to use rhetorical signaling devices and simplification strategies to communicate specialist areas of knowledge and render them comprehensible to learners (Elder, 2001: 152).

Elder's observation above and the work of Freeman (2016) and others suggest that the ability to teach through English, while partly drawing on a person's general communicative ability in English, also requires knowledge of a specific genre of English together with the discourse skills used in the mode of *instruction* – the 'functional language skills' referred to by Young et al., earlier. The ELT profession has often assumed that native-speakers of English are automatically endowed with the ability to use English in this way (the bias of 'native-speakerism' referred to above), while NESST teachers will be able to do so if they improve their mastery of English. However, the ability to use English in a way that supports the learning of English (documented below) is something that has to be mastered by both NESST teachers as well as teachers whose native language is English, and can be regarded as a variety of English for specific purposes. Native-speakers of English often find that they have to work hard to be able to use English effectively in this way. (When I did my initial teacher training we were trained to teach only using words within a 1000 word vocabulary – referred to as 'the little language' – to ensure that our use of English was not marked by overuse of idioms, colloquialism and low frequency vocabulary and grammatical items). For some teachers the discourse skills needed to teach through English may (or may not) be acquired 'on the job' so to speak. For others they can be the focus of explicit instruction.

The bias towards native-speakers is seen in the curriculum of many certificate courses for English teachers. Hobbs (2013) notes that initial teacher training courses, such as the CELTA and the Cert-ESOL offered in large numbers world wide and serving as an initial preparation for teaching, generally assume that the participant is a native-speaker of English: they do not include a component on the teacher's language or the language of teaching. Instead the curriculum of such courses generally consists of units on content

knowledge (usually referred to as ‘language awareness’ and including basic features of the phonology, syntax and vocabulary of English), lesson planning, teaching skills, teaching practice and materials preparation.

A native-speaker teacher on a certificate course cited in Hobbs (2013: 171) comments:

Simply being a native speaker of English ... seemed barely adequate preparation for the new way of framing and packaging the English language I was being asked both to understand and to “perform” as a teacher... I had little understanding of what I was doing...

## The Language and Discourse Skills Involved in Teaching English through English

Elder (1994: 9) suggested that there are ‘four aspects of language and language-related ability’ that determine a language teacher’s ability to teach a language effectively:

1. The ability to use the target language as both the medium and target of instruction
2. The ability to modify target language input to render it comprehensible to learners
3. The ability to produce well-formed input for learners
4. The ability to draw learners’ attention to features of the form language (Elder, 1994: 9–11).

Drawing on the concept of *decision-making* (Shavelson, 1973) I would suggest that these aspects of language knowledge and ability can be illustrated in relation to three phases of teaching: *before teaching*, *during teaching* and *after teaching*.

### Before Teaching

This phase refers to decisions teachers make prior to teaching a lesson. Calderhead (1984: 69) pointed out that ‘it is in planning that teachers translate syllabus guidelines, instructional expectations, and their own beliefs and ideologies of education into guides for action in the classroom. This aspect of teaching provides the structure and purpose for what teachers and pupils do in the classroom’. In the case of language teaching, a number of these decisions will reflect both the teacher’s level of language awareness and knowledge as well as the teacher’s discourse skills. For example:

- Setting goals for a lesson. In planning how to use a text as a basis for a reading lesson the teacher’s language proficiency can influence his or her choice of a literal comprehension task (where the learners complete the task using words and information explicitly stated in the text), rather than one requiring higher order thinking and communicative skills – which the teacher may have difficulty expressing in English.
- Using a written as opposed to a mental lesson plan. Limitations in language proficiency may mean that the teacher is dependent upon a detailed written lesson plan that identifies specific lexical items, structures and other language features,

thus restricting the potential scope of the lesson, as opposed to the use of a mental lesson plan that allows for more unpredictable language to emerge during a lesson.

- Selecting texts and other sources of lesson input that are appropriate to the learners' level and the goals of a lesson.
- Consulting dictionaries and reference sources.
- Choosing a text or other form of input to a planned activity based on the linguistic features of a text.
- Understanding the potential difficulty for learners of a linguistic feature of a planned activity or text that will form the basis for an activity.
- Modifying or adapting language content in a textbook to make it more suitable for his or her learners.
- Simplifying authentic texts by reducing them in length, and simplifying vocabulary and rephrasing complex structures.
- Translating texts into English (e.g. children's stories).
- Preparing posters.
- Preparing cue cards for classroom activities.
- Transcribing a text from a tape or video recording.
- Designing and selecting activities that include a focus on specific aspects of language production or communication, such as a role-play task that is designed to practise turn-taking.
- Sequencing activities based on their linguistic or communicative difficulty.
- Choosing or designing an activity that does not make demands on the teacher's communicative ability. For example a drill or pattern-practice activity makes few demands on the teacher's language proficiency while a role play or information gap task would be more challenging for the teacher to manage since the language students use in carrying it out is not predictable. Similarly an activity based on dialogue practise is less demanding on the teacher's language ability than a free discussion activity.

In general we can say that a teacher with limited language knowledge and discourse skills is restricted in the choice of activities available to him or her and may not be able to move beyond the prescribed syllabus, as would be the case if I were to teach French or Indonesian. Hence despite the considerable effort that has been made in many countries to promote communicative teaching methods, the continued use of grammar translation and audiolingualism has been partly attributed to the effect of teachers' limited language proficiency. Like most methods they offer teachers a package of routines and procedures that can be implemented without making undue demands on their language ability. Williams and Burden offered the following explanation for the dominance Audiolingualism achieved and for the fact that at the time of writing continued to be used in many countries despite attempts to replace it with more communicative teaching methods:

There are a number of possible practical reasons for this. In many countries teachers are not provided with a professional training; in some contexts the prerequisite for teaching is a primary education. It can be quicker and easier to teach teachers to use the steps involved in an

audiolingual approach: presentation, practice, repetition and drills. Teachers can also follow the steps provided in their coursebook in a fairly mechanical way. Teachers who lack confidence tend to be less frightened of these techniques, whereas allowing language to develop through meaningful interaction in the classroom can be considerably daunting, and requires teachers with some professional knowledge. *An audiolingual methodology can also be used by teachers whose own knowledge of the target language is limited* (1997: 12, italics added).

## During Teaching

Once the teacher enters the classroom and starts a lesson, language knowledge and ability also plays a crucial role in managing and directing the progress of the lesson as described by Elder (2001). Bernstein (1990) suggested that in the classroom, language has two primary functions: the regulative function – which refers to how language is used to manage the social space of the classroom – and the instructional function, which refers to how language is used to develop the knowledge and skills that are the focus of a lesson. Language also plays a central role in both scaffolded learning and dialogic learning. Sociocultural theory views language learning as a social process of guided participation, mediated through the guidance of a more knowledgeable other (scaffolding). Through repeated participation in a variety of joint activities, the novice gradually develops new knowledge and skills. In the classroom, scaffolding is the process of interaction between two or more people as they carry out a classroom activity, and where one person (e.g. the teacher or another learner) has more advanced knowledge than the other (the learner). During the process, discourse is jointly created through the process of assisted or mediated performance, and interaction proceeds as a kind of joint problem-solving between teacher and student. Throughout, the teacher provides opportunities for noticing how language is used, experimenting with language use, practising new modes of discourse and restructuring existing language knowledge. Language proficiency can be presumed to play an important role in determining the effectiveness with which the teacher can provide support for scaffolded learning of this kind.

Language use is also crucial in facilitating a mode of teaching referred to as dialogic talk, which Alexander (2008: 30) describes as talk which achieves ‘common understanding, through structured, cumulative questioning and discussion which guide and prompt, reduce choices, minimize risk and error, and expedite “handover” of concepts and principles’.

The following are examples of classroom acts and activities reflecting both regulative and instructional aspects of teaching as well as scaffolded instruction and that require specialized discourse skills for their effective realization:

- Explaining the goals of a lesson
- Explaining task requirements
- Giving instructions
- Using formulaic expressions and phrases for classroom routines and procedures
- Using English for classroom management
- Explaining the procedures for an activity
- Modelling the pronunciation of words and sentences.

- Reading aloud from a text or passage in the textbook
- Asking questions
- Answering students' questions
- Using terminology related to language (e.g. *clause, function word*)
- Giving explanations
- Using metaphors and synonyms in explaining meanings
- Guiding and monitoring students' work
- Providing corrective feedback
- Using transition words and phrases to mark the closure of one activity and start of another activity
- Monitoring his or her own language use and adjusting it for accuracy or difficulty
- Paraphrasing and summarizing information in a text
- Giving praise and encouragement for students' attempts to communicate
- Explaining the meaning of words or sentences.
- Expanding students' responses to questions
- Providing examples of how words and other items are used
- Building on and developing students' responses
- Managing classroom talk towards specific lesson goals
- Reviewing a lesson
- Providing spoken preparation for written and other tasks
- Checking students' understanding
- Leading discussion activities
- Giving feedback on the accuracy and appropriacy of students' language

Sesek (2007: 417) provides a number of examples of how limitations in a teacher's use of English led to misunderstanding on the part of the learners. In the first example the teacher confuses students by not using transition words between activities, while the second results from the teacher's pronunciation.

1. Novice teacher announces lesson topic and tries to elicit a key lexeme ('siblings'). *'Today we'll talk about brothers and sisters. What other word do we know that describes both?'* Students volunteer guesses, but it is clear that they did not understand the question. When the teacher gives the answer, we see that several students had known the word 'siblings'. Why did they not understand the teacher? There was a cohesion problem: the word 'other' is the only word referring to both brothers and sisters, and with the postmodifier used here it cannot refer back to the first sentence. The illusion of coherence was all the more problematic since the teacher did not use any linguistic means to signal to the learners that she was moving from announcing the topic to eliciting vocabulary.
2. Novice teacher is discussing the topic of brand products with adult learners. After talking about other types of products, she says: 'What about watches?', mispronouncing the vowel sound in 'watch' by making it too narrow. The learners look puzzled and do not respond. Noticing this, the teacher repeats the word once or twice more, with more stress, but with the same pronunciation problem. The learners still don't know what she means. Then she points to her own wrist watch, and the learners finally comprehend ('Oh, watches').

H. Richards (et al., 2013) conducted case studies of seven New Zealand foreign language teachers with different levels of proficiency in their teaching language using data from interviews and classroom observations and investigated the following aspects of their teaching:

1. Exploitation of target language resources
2. Provision of appropriate language models
3. Provision of corrective feedback
4. Use of the TL to manage the class
5. Provision of accurate explanations
6. Provision of rich language input
7. Ability to improvise

Their findings are summarized as follows:

the two teachers with advanced TL proficiency were observed operating in all seven aspects of teaching. The remaining five, with limited proficiency in the language they were teaching, attempted the first four aspects of teaching to varying degrees. However, they were unable to provide rich language input at a natural pace and showed little ability to respond to questions about the target language or culture (H. Richards et al., 2013: 237–38).

However, the teacher's use of language while teaching is not only influenced by his or her own language proficiency and discourse skills but will also be impacted by the learners' proficiency level. Teachers generally adapt the complexity of their language to facilitate understanding and communication with their learners, hence when teaching low-proficiency learners there may be less opportunities to improvise or engage in dialogic talk than with higher proficiency learners (observation from K. Sadeghi).

## **After Teaching**

Teachers may also make use of their knowledge of language in decisions they may make after teaching, although these decisions need not necessarily be made in their teaching language. For example:

- Reflecting on the quality of language students produced during a lesson.
- Reflecting on adjustments the teacher may have made to the lesson based on language difficulties students encountered during the lesson.
- Identifying a language focus for follow-up lessons or activities.
- Planning follow-up tests or other forms of assessment.

Elder (1994: 11) observes that professional development may also be dependent on the teacher's language proficiency and could affect the extent of a teacher's participation in professional development activities of the following kind:

- Reading books and articles in professional journals and magazines.
- Listening to radio programmes.

- Watching movies or television.
- Joining on-line forums or communities for teachers.
- Accessing English texts, videos etc. on the internet.
- Attending seminars, workshops and conferences in English.

However, professional development activities likewise need not necessarily be limited to those conducted in their teaching language (Freeman, personal communication).

## **Determining Proficiency Benchmarks for Language Teachers**

If the teacher's discourse skills and ability in English or his or her teaching language is assumed to constitute a core dimension of his or her professional competence, establishing the nature and features of this kind of ability is crucial in designing teacher education programmes for many language teachers. What constitutes the threshold of communicative ability that a teacher has to reach in order to be able to use English or another language effectively as a medium of instruction? And does this require a special kind of proficiency different from that which a second language user of English would need for other purposes? As Elder comments (2001: 149): 'how does one define the domain of teacher proficiency and is it distinguishable from other areas of professional competence, or, indeed, from what is often referred to as 'general' language proficiency'?

If a general level of language proficiency was sufficient to equip teachers with the necessary language resources to be able to teach effectively through English, benchmarks described in the CEFR or in the frameworks such as the Cambridge proficiency exams would be sufficient in designing the language component of teacher training programmes as well as for establishing standards for teachers. This was the assumption behind a large-scale assessment project in Vietnam. As a consequence of the expanded role of English in Vietnam, benchmarks referenced to the Common European Framework as well as other sources have been established for teachers, students, and government workers. According to a recent report:

Upper secondary (high school) teachers are required to reach Level C1 while both lower secondary (junior high) and primary teachers are expected to reach the B2 Level, with a provisional B1 Level for primary teachers (MOET, 2012a; NFL2020, VNIES [Vietnam Institute of Educational Sciences], & MOET 2013).

As a part of the NFL2020, an unprecedented, widespread assessment of teacher proficiency has been conducted since 2011 among public school English teachers. Findings from these assessments are alarming when compared to the new proficiency benchmarks. Assessment statistics for 2011 indicate that 97% of the 3,591 primary school teachers tested fell below the B2 benchmark set by the government, 93% of the 3,969 lower secondary teachers who were assessed fell below the B2 level, and 98% of 2,061 high school English teachers fell below the C1 benchmark ...44,995 English teachers had been assessed to date since 2011. The results of those assessments show that 83% of primary English teachers' English language proficiency levels fell below the provisional B1 benchmark level, 87.1% of lower- secondary English teachers tested below the B2 benchmark, 91.8% of the upper-secondary English teachers

assessed did not meet the C1 benchmark, nor did 44.6% of college and university English teachers (Dudzik and Nguyen, 2015: 48).

These results however reflect that the benchmarks for the test were ‘general language proficiency’ rather than the ability to teach through English. Freeman (personal communication) reports that in the *ELTeach Project* (described below) when teachers in Vietnam were assessed not against general English but with reference to the classroom language needed to teach through English (and provided an opportunity to study it), Vietnamese teachers performed well.

The challenge in test development therefore is how to measure the functional competence required to teach English through English, an issue of considerable importance if such a test is also to serve as a gatekeeping mechanism. In describing the development of a proficiency test of this kind for foreign language teachers in Australia, Elder described two purposes for the test:

- 1) As a benchmark for teacher education – by making explicit the occupational requirements of the foreign language teacher, this test serves to identify individual strengths and weaknesses in order to assist teacher educators in setting goals for language instruction in the context of pre-service or in-service training courses.
- 2) To certify language teachers – the test provides a means for determining whether those applying for employment as language teachers ... are sufficiently proficient in the target language to perform their teaching duties effectively’ (Elder, 1994: 8).

Such a high stakes test would serve not only as a benchmark for professional training but could also offer a model of ‘best practice’ (Elder, 1994: 12). The difficulty for the test designer, as Elder pointed out, is to identify test items for such a test that measure those language skills that are not simply aspects of general language proficiency.

In developing a test for teachers of Italian in Australia, a sequence of seven task types was used in designing the pilot version of the test:

1. Warm up.
2. Reading aloud.
3. Retelling a story.
4. Giving instructions.
5. Assigning and modelling a role-play.
6. Making a presentation on an aspect of Italian culture.
7. Explaining learner error.

The test distinguished four levels of competence:

1. Advanced professional competence.
2. Professional competence.
3. Minimum professional competence.
4. Limited professional competence.

A similar approach was taken in Hong Kong in developing proficiency benchmarks for English teachers in Hong Kong, which resulted in the *Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers of English* (LPATE) – an assessment of standards of ability in English for Hong Kong primary and secondary school teachers of English (Coniam and Falvey, 2013). The test consists of ‘a battery of “formal” tests (i.e. Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking) and a live performance test of Classroom Language’ (Coniam and Falvey, 2013: 147).

The Reading and Listening Tests would be analytically marked. The composition element in the Writing Test, the Speaking Test and Classroom Language Assessment components were to be scale-based with descriptors specifying levels of achievement on different scales. Failure to reach accepted standards would result in retraining and possible dismissal from the profession of current teachers and a bar to entry to the profession for new entrants (Coniam and Falvey, 2013: 147–48).

The components of the test are:

### **Classroom Language Assessment**

*Purpose:* Demonstrate the ability to deliver an English lesson to students in a primary or secondary class.

*Input and output characteristics:* Two separate assessments in a candidate’s school of a single-period (40 minute) lesson.

### **Reading Test**

*Purpose:* Demonstrate the ability to read and understand texts of the type that an English teacher might read for both teaching and professional development purposes.

*Input and output characteristics:* Three sections (with a combined word length of 1,500- 2,000 words), each consisting of questions on texts of various text types: narrative, arguments, descriptions, etc.

### **Listening Test**

*Purpose:* Demonstrate the ability to understand spoken texts of the type that an English teacher might read for both teaching and professional development.

*Input and output characteristics:* Three or four recordings of spoken discourse (heard once only) of various types: radio news, interviews, chat shows, current affairs shows, etc.

### **Writing Test**

*Purpose:* Demonstrate the ability to 1. write a coherent text, 2. correct errors in a student composition, 3. provide a written explanation of errors in a student composition.

**Part 1 - Input and output characteristics:** Candidates to write one text of 400 words (e.g. expository, narrative, descriptive, etc.) around a topic familiar to Hong Kong teachers.

**Part 2** – (two tasks) - *Input and output characteristics*: Limited-response blank-filling tasks.

Task 2A: Detection of errors or problems in a piece of writing.

Task 2B: Explanation of (different) errors in the same piece of writing.

## Speaking Test

*Purpose*: Demonstrate the ability to 1. read aloud an English language teaching-type prose passage, 2. recount an experience/present arguments, 3. participate in a discussion on an education-related topic.

**Part 1** (two tasks)

Task 1A: Reading Aloud – *Input and output characteristics*: Reading aloud a prose passage.

Task 1B: Recounting an experience/Presenting an argument – *Input and output characteristics*: Responding to a prompt.

**Part 2**: Group interaction: Participating in a group discussion related to an English language issue – *Input and output characteristics*: Responding to a prompt.

Freeman (personal communication) points out that the Hong Kong test together with the approach to assessment used in the *ELTeach Project* (described below) reflect the fact that since teaching contexts and demands vary so widely, tests of this kind need to reflect the context the test is designed for rather than context-free measures of general language proficiency.

## Implications for Provision of Language Enhancement for Language Teachers

If we recognize that the ability to teach English through English or to teach a foreign language through the foreign language requires the use of specialized communicative skills rather than simply higher levels of ‘general language proficiency’, what curriculum options are available in language teacher education?

One of the earliest approaches to address this issue directly was Willis’ *Teaching English Through English* (1981), which focused on the language needed for nine classroom functions and activities:

1. The beginning of the lesson.
2. Checking attendance.
3. Describing physical conditions in the classroom.
4. Getting organized.
5. Using visual aids.
6. Using tape recorders and other electrical equipment.
7. Dividing the class up: choral/individuals and teams.
8. Dealing with interruptions: latecomers, things lost.
9. Ending the lesson or a stage in a lesson.

An example from the field of foreign language teacher education is The New Zealand Teacher Professional Development Languages (TPDL) programme, a one-year,

part-time professional development programme for foreign language teachers in New Zealand's schools which has three components; a Language Study component which focuses on knowledge of and proficiency in the teacher's target teaching language (TL); a Second Language Acquisition component; and a component called In-School Support. Teachers with varying levels of proficiency in their teaching language may take the programme (H. Richards et al., 2013). The language proficiency component of the programme does not appear to deal directly with language-for-teaching but rather with general proficiency. Other support for those who wish to develop their language proficiency is offered through International Languages Exchanges and Pathways (ILEP, see <http://www.ilep.ac.nz/pathways>) and Ministry of Education funded Language Immersion Award opportunities offered through AFS New Zealand (see <http://www.afs.org.nz/educators/liateachers/>).

An undergraduate programme for English teachers in Indonesia is described by Rudianto (2017) who gives an account of a four year BA programme for Indonesian English Language teachers that addresses general proficiency through skills development courses throughout the programme and an English-for-teaching component through practical teaching experiences in schools:

The ELE curriculum encompasses four parameters, consisting of *personal qualities* (the personal qualities a teacher should possess), *specialist knowledge* (the specific disciplinary and pedagogical content knowledge an English teacher should possess), *specific skills and capacities* (what an English teacher can do with his or her expertise), and *general skills and capacities* (the managerial roles an English teacher can perform in school) (Rudianto, 2017).

An approach to preparing teachers with the specific language needed to carry out classroom tasks and routines as well as provide support for teaching methodology is the *ELTeach Project*, an on-line self-access training and assessment programme developed as a collaboration between National Geographic Learning and Educational Testing Service. It consists of two core courses, one focusing on teachers' classroom English competence (*English-for-Teaching*) and one dealing with foundations of English-language classroom practice and methodology (*Professional Knowledge for ELT*). The courses are self-access but usually completed in 30–40 hours. Its key features are individualized and self-paced learning, self-managed practice with progress measured according to a framework of performance outcomes. Additional support for teachers in the programme can be provided through face-to-face meetings and moderated support sessions according to local needs and requirements (Freeman et al., 2016). Social media is also used to monitor and support participants as they follow the programme. In the *English-for-Teaching* component three functional areas are addressed: *managing the classroom*, *understanding and communicating lesson content*, and *assessing students and giving them feedback* (Freeman et al., 2015). For each functional area, classroom routines are identified as well as the language forms or 'exemplars' that can be used to carry out each routine. These were not intended to be the only or 'best' language that could be used but language that can facilitate the process of teaching. For example:

**Table 2.** Language to Facilitate Teaching.

| Functional Area                                | Classroom Routine   | Language Exemplars   |
|--|---|--|
| Managing the classroom                         | Organizing students to start an activity                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Please go to your seat</li> <li>• Copy the words from the board</li> <li>• Use the words to write a summary of the story</li> </ul>                             |
| Understanding and communicating lesson content | Giving instructions and explanations                          | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Work with a partner</li> <li>• Match the questions and answers</li> <li>• Take turns to read the paragraphs; then underline the words you don't know</li> </ul> |
| Assessing students and providing feedback      | Responding to student oral output during a role play activity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• That's right</li> <li>• Nice work</li> <li>• Look at the example in the chart again</li> <li>• Those are great ideas</li> </ul>                                 |

Freeman et al., (2015: 137) point out that whereas a programme that focuses on improving the teachers' general proficiency would require a considerable number of hours, much less time is required if the focus is on the specific language needed to carry out classroom routines; an 'ESP' approach of this kind is likely to have a greater impact on classroom practice.

A programme designed for teachers at primary school in Japan is described by Moser, Harris and Carle (2012). The programme consisted of 'two 90 minute classes held consecutively, once every two weeks for a total of 15 weeks' (2012: 82). One class focused on basic communication skills (i.e. general proficiency) while the other was on classroom English and was designed 'to provide teachers with practice in using English for pedagogical purposes during teacher-led communicative task work' (Moser et al., 2012). The primary focus was on the teacher's use of English for classroom management, for task work, and for monologues. An example of one of the teacher-talk tasks used in the programme was a listen-and-draw task, in which the teachers carried out a task following instructions on a scripted recording, reflected on the language and discourse strategies they heard on the recording, planned a similar task to the one they had just completed, tried out the task with a peer and recorded their performance, listened to their recording and transcribed it, compared their performance with the language used on the original script, then repeated the listen-and draw task again. Considerable improvement was observed with the teachers' repeat performance of the task. The feedback on the programme suggested it helped boost teachers' confidence and willingness to use English in the classroom and equipped them with some of the language resources they needed to do so.

An approach that has had a long history in both South Korea and Japan is to employ native-speakers to teach the spoken English section of English lessons and for the national teachers to teach those aspects of the English course that do not depend on fluency in English (such as the grammar or reading strands) In Japan, the Japan Exchange

and Teaching Programme (JET) is a government initiative that brings native-speaker college graduates from countries such as the US, Canada, the UK, Australia and New Zealand to work as assistant language teachers in elementary, junior high and high school. There are typically some 5000 JET assistants in Japan in any given year. In South Korea there has been a recent move to only employ native-speaker teachers in elementary school and to focus on improving the English of Korean English teachers at junior and middle school. However, the reported effectiveness of the *ELTeach Project* referred to above suggests that a more appropriate focus of support for Korean English teachers would be to help them develop the ability to teach English through English rather than to try to raise their general proficiency levels in English. The former depends on developing functional skills in a restricted and targeted domain of language use which can be mastered in a relatively short time as demonstrated in *ELTeach*, while the latter requires investment of a large number of hours of instruction, as is seen in the table below:

**Table 3.** Approximate Number of Hours Required to Reach Different Levels in CEFR and the Cambridge Exams.

| CEFR Level | Cambridge English Exam                      | Number of Hours (approx.) |
|------------|---|---------------------------|
| <b>C2</b>  | <i>Cambridge English: Proficiency (CPE)</i> | 1000–1200                 |
| <b>C1</b>  | <i>Cambridge English: Advanced (CAE)</i>    | 700–800                   |
| <b>B2</b>  | <i>Cambridge English: First (FCE)</i>       | 500–600                   |
| <b>B1</b>  | <i>Cambridge English Preliminary (PET)</i>  | 350–400                   |
| <b>A2</b>  | <i>Cambridge English Key (KET)</i>          | 180–200                   |

Source: <https://support.cambridgeenglish.org/hc/en-gb/articles/202838506-Guided-learning-hours>.

For international students enrolled in graduate diplomas and degrees in English medium universities, provision is sometimes made for language development courses for so-called NESST teachers. As course participants they are reported to ‘often have lower language proficiency than native speaker participants, but higher language awareness, and have expressed clear interest in developing their proficiency during their course’ (Anderson, 2016: 263). A challenge in designing graduate programmes of this kind is how to integrate a language development strand into the programme for those students who may need or request additional language support (Frazier et al., 2011). They may need ‘language enhancement’ despite the fact that they completed general proficiency courses before they have entered the programme or may have achieved a high score of TOEFL, IELTS or similar tests. Brinton (2004) gives a colourful example of the comments of a graduate student of this kind:

After six-week field practicum, I find my biggest obstacle as a good teacher comes from my language ability. Since my own English ability is lousy, thus, when I explain something to students, I think I unconsciously make lots of errors or express ineptly. As tonight, I said ‘in this moment’ instead of ‘at this moment,’ ‘after their marry’ instead of ‘after their marriage.’ A language teacher, should set good example for students to model rather than confuse them as I did... I can sense that a qualified language teacher should at least possess enough knowledge of the targeted language... I really wonder about my teaching quality? Sometimes, I can’t help

to think maybe I am 'brain-retarded' in learning language. (I don't improve much ever I have almost stayed here for one year. It's really frustrated!) (Brinton, 2004: 197).

Eslami et al., (2010: 223) commenting on perceptions of this kind by NNEST graduate students note that such students are typically aware of their limited language proficiency which they believe is part of the requirement of being an effective English teacher; they are aware of some of the errors they make and are concerned that they cannot provide good language models; they are aware of a threshold of language proficiency that they need to aim for; despite spending time in an English speaking country they do not notice much improvement in their English.

One response to this issue is to integrate a language development component with other courses in a graduate TESOL programme (Murdoch, 1994; Luchini, 2004). The methodology course is often mentioned as one that could include a focus on language development. For example, Cullen describes the use of lesson transcripts, based on video recordings of classroom teaching that 'can be used to develop teachers' classroom language skills on in-service courses, and at the same time deepen their understanding of teaching processes' (2002: 219–20). He gives examples of how short transcripts selected to illustrate teachers' use of questions can be used 'to develop teachers' awareness of different kinds of questions and their different pedagogical purposes, and on the other, to develop their ability to ask similar kinds of questions fluently and confidently themselves' (Cullen, 2002: 221–22). Activities used with the transcript include following them as the video is played, reading aloud, role-playing the transcript, and the use of worksheets to practise the language used in the transcripts. The teachers later go on to plan lessons drawing on both the language and teaching processes demonstrated in the use of transcripts addressing both language improvement and pedagogy.

Eslami et al., (2010: 231) discuss inclusion of activities that develop pragmatic competence within a TESOL methodology course.

As part of a TESOL methodology course, students can be involved in two main activity types. The first group of activities aims at raising the students' pragmatic awareness, and the second group of activities involves the students in communicative practice. Awareness raising activities aim to show NNESTs how language forms are used appropriately in context. They expose students to the pragmatic aspects of language and provide them with analytic tools to further their pragmatic development as the need arises.

Eslami et al., (2010: 230) also discuss the use of role-play and game activities to develop practical teaching skills as well as provide opportunities for language improvement.

They increase trainees' independence, improve their analytical abilities, help to apply academic knowledge to real life situations, and provide an opportunity for reflective practice. Trainees learn to foresee and overcome certain problems they might face in the future, and to use the appropriate language in doing so. Role-plays may also assist in subduing trainees' anxiety as imaginary teaching situations are acted out in a familiar and fairly secure setting. An additional benefit for NNESTs involves development and practice of the target language skills. Pretending to teach an ESL/EFL class, participants of the game can master classroom discourse conventions as well as learn to adjust their input to the level of language proficiency of their 'students'.

## Conclusions

The relationship between the language proficiency of language teachers' and their ability to teach in the language is complex, and often problematic both for teachers who recognize limitations in their language abilities as well as for providers of training and professional development programmes for teachers. This article has sought to describe how the issue of teacher language proficiency has often been understood and addressed in language teacher education as well as approaches that have been used in pre-service, in-service and graduate programmes for language teachers. Interestingly, although this issue has achieved some attention in the last 30 years with pioneering work by Willis and Elder, it has not come into focus again until relatively recently, particularly through the *ELTeach Project* which has redefined the relationship between language knowledge and ability and pedagogy. My purpose here has not been to downplay or trivialize the importance of mastery of their subject – including language knowledge and ability – for language teachers, since as we have seen, language knowledge and ability is central to the professional identity of language teachers as well as their sense of efficacy. However, language proficiency and teaching ability are not the same thing. Traditionally the ability to teach English through English has been understood as to a large extent a language proficiency problem: once teachers have improved the level of their English (or their teaching language) they will be able to teach effectively in English. And on this assumption teachers who are native-speakers of their teaching language are regarded as more legitimate and better qualified language teachers than those who do not have a native-like command of their teaching language. However, this deficit view of the NESST teacher fails to recognize the nature of teaching English through English. An alternative view point is to recognize it as a kind of ESP or *teaching a language for specific purposes*, one that does require specialized knowledge and skills but which does not require native-speaker proficiency in English and for teachers with even basic abilities in English – one that can be effectively acquired in a realizable timeframe given suitable training and resources.

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