

ICT & Innovations in Education

International Electronic Journal

ISSN 2321 – 7189 | Volume 2, Issue 2 | April 2014

High School Teachers' Self-assessed Language Proficiency and Teaching Effectiveness: A Self-Report

Hosein Sadani

English Department, Science and Research Branch, Islamic Azad University, Gorgan, Iran

Seyed Jalal Abdolmanafi Rokni, Ph.D.

English Department, Golestan University, Gorgan, Iran

* Corresponding author email: j.abdolmanafi@yahoo.com

www.ictjournal.com

ABSTRACT

Self-monitoring and self-assessment are used for different of purposes, including diagnosis and feedback, and teaching evaluation. The present study aimed at investigating high school teachers' self-assessed language proficiency and its impact on their teaching effectiveness. To this aim, the researchers invited fifty-six male and female high school English teachers, B.A. and M.A. and conducted the research. Teachers' comments considering their perception of language proficiency and its impact on their teaching effectiveness were gathered. Analysis of the results done qualitatively showed that there was indeed much similarity among the answers provided by the teachers. They unanimously asserted that the key point in improving their teaching effectiveness was to promote their language proficiency by different techniques. Participants understood the necessity to improve their own language proficiency, yet they needed more additional support from language educators and the schools where they work. EFL teachers and supervisors are suggested to take the findings of this research into considerations in their language classrooms.

Key words: language proficiency, self-assessment, self-monitoring, teacher assessment

Introduction

When the word “language proficiency” is heard, we might think of speaking ability first. However, language proficiency refers to a person’s ability to use a language for a variety of purposes, including speaking, listening, reading, and writing. Proficiency is commonly measured using guidelines developed by standard and international organizations such as TOEFL, IELTS, and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL). The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines measure proficiency on a scale of ten levels: Novice Low, Mid, and High; Intermediate Low, Mid, and High; Advanced Low, Mid, and High. Superior Learning and teaching English as a foreign language and English proficiency have become extremely important requirements for Iranian teachers and students in recent years due to their increasing need to comprehend the academic materials written in English.

Every one admits its key role in any society as a link-language, a library language and a medium of instruction in any educational system. A problem exists here and that is most Iranian students are not able to communicate efficiently after many years studying English at schools (Moradi, 1996; Rashidi, 1995, Yarmohammadi, 2000). This might partly be due to their unfruitful studying or lack of having proficient teachers who have not been either trained or assessed well before entering their professional jobs.

It is evident that teachers' language proficiency plays an important role in the practice of their teaching expertise. Since teachers' perception of their own language proficiency has been barely investigated in the context of Iranian high schools, it is meaningful to ascertain teachers' self-evaluated language proficiency and to explore how teachers' language proficiency affects their teaching and thus students' language development. According to Abdolmanafi Rokni, Hamidi and Gorgani (2014), any useful technique or method which is capable of promoting language achievement or language proficiency of the learners should be tried and implemented.

This study also tries to explore teachers' perceptions about the relationship between their language proficiency and their teaching effectiveness. The study is meant to provide evidence and information for pre-service and in-service teacher training programs in terms of teachers' language needs and their professional development.

As Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) has won more supporters and advocates in Iran, there has been a good deal of research focusing on implementing CLT and moving from a teacher-centered curriculum to a learner-centered curriculum in Iran (Wang, 1999). However, little research has been conducted concerning the opinions and beliefs about ESL/EFL teachers' language proficiency and how their language proficiency informs their decision-making and affects their teaching and implementation of CLT and a learner-centered curriculum in the Iran's high schools.

One way of overcoming these problems and moving towards teaching development is self-assessment or self-perception. This study was, therefore, an attempt to qualitatively investigate the effect of teachers’ self-assessment and self-perception of their language proficiency on their teaching effectiveness.

Research Question

The present study is an attempt to provide an answer to the following research question.

RQ: How does teachers' language proficiency affect their teaching effectiveness?

Review of the Related Literature

Language Assessment and Self-Monitoring

Assessment is a key component in language classrooms to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Lynch (2001) asserts that assessment has undergone a paradigm shift, from psychometrics to a broader model of educational assessment, from a testing and examination culture to an assessment culture. Assessment is often used in different contexts and means different things to different stakeholders. Assessment might basically be thought in terms of testing and grading: scoring quizzes and exams and assigning course grades to students (Lynch, 2001).

However, in technical terms, assessment is used as a way to inform teacher or students about how well they are doing during a course of study. In this regard, new ways of assessment have been developed to show what can be learned and what can be done by learners themselves in a course of study. There are different types of assessments; however, our focus in this study was self-assessment which is done through self-monitoring.

As to the necessity of self-monitoring in teaching, Richards (1990) introduces three major approaches: personal reflection, self-reporting, and recording lessons. Each is briefly discussed below.

1. Personal reflection:

Personal reflection is the simplest approach through the use of a diary or journal in which the teacher prepares an open extensive report of what happened in teaching. Among many others, one advantage of using diaries is that it allows teachers to explore information that might not be accessible in other ways. It serves to initiate insights into the teaching experience.

2. Self-reporting:

Self-reporting involves completing an inventory or checklist in which the teacher indicates which teaching practices were used within a lesson. Teachers can check up to what extent their assumptions about their own teaching are reflected in their actual teaching practices. A teacher, for instance, can use self-reporting to find out about the kinds of teaching activities he has used regularly, the extent to which primary learning goals for a lesson are being met, and the kinds of activities that work well or do not work at all.

3. Recording lessons:

Recording lessons include audio or video recording of lessons which provide a very reliable moment-to-moment record of what actually happened in the class, though it is not possible for every teacher to use. Teachers' self-assessment should include personal reflection, self-reporting, recording the lessons, and interviewing (peers, colleagues, etc.). In the next part, some previous studies which have been done in this regard will be discussed.

Previous Studies

There have been several studies considering language proficiency and self-assessment of teachers as independent and dependent variables, some of which are as follows: In 2005, Cheng carried out a research into the reliability and potential benefits of incorporating peer assessment into English language programs. Cheng (2005) compared the students' attitudes towards assessing both the English language proficiency and the other aspects of performance of their peers. His findings suggest that students had a less positive attitude towards assessing their peers' language proficiency, but they did not score their peers' language proficiency very differently from the other assessment criteria. There was a discrepancy between students and teachers in their respective marking behaviors and the ways oral and written language proficiency were interpreted.

In addition, Chen (2008) looked into students' learning to self-assess oral performance in English by comparing student assessment with teacher assessment. The assessment components were developed by the teacher and the criteria included four elements within a five-level scoring standard. Comparison between self- and teacher assessment was analyzed in terms of scores and comments given over two assessment cycles. Results of the study demonstrated that self- and teacher ratings differed significantly in the first cycle of assessment, but were closely aligned in the second. Chen's (2008) study showed that through feedback and practice, participating students made significant progress in learning to assess their own oral performance.

In 2010, Butler and Lee worked on the effectiveness of self-assessment among more than 200 young learners of EFL. Some positive effects were found considering self-assessment on the students' English performance as well as their confidence in learning English. It was also found that teachers and students perceived the effectiveness of self-assessment in a different way based on their teaching/learning contexts. Individual teachers' views regarding assessment also shaped their perceived effectiveness in implementing the new self-assessment practice.

In another study, Fahim, Hamidi, and Najafi (2013) investigated the barriers that Iranian high school students face while speaking. Both students (language institutes and schools) and teachers were interviewed. Teachers' comments on the students' answers and teachers' separate answers on the causes of speaking problems were collected. After the reflection (self-monitoring) of the teachers, the researchers made a comparison between the willingness to communicate (WTC) of high school and language institute students. The results of the study using teachers' own assessment demonstrated that language institute students were much more willing to communicate.

Methodology

Introduction

A qualitative method was used to measure and elicit teachers' views towards their language proficiency and its impact on their teaching effectiveness. The qualitative method used in this study was the interview. It was conducted to investigate the reasons for the inadequate language proficiency teachers perceive themselves as having and the relationship between language proficiency and teaching expertise.

Participants

The participants of this study were fifty-six high school teachers, 31 male and 25 female teachers. Forty-eight of them had B.A. degree and the rest (eight) were M.A. holders with three to twenty years of teaching experience.

Instrumentation

Interviews were carried out to help qualitatively interpret answers given by the teachers. To answer the research question, different types of interview questions were asked. The first type was to explore teachers' in-depth opinions about the possible reasons for inadequacy of English language proficiency and also to investigate the impact of teachers' language proficiency on their teaching. The second type was to elicit teachers' perceptions of how to improve teachers' language proficiency.

Procedure

In order to find an answer to the research question mentioned earlier in this study, it seemed necessary to explore what teachers' self-assessed reporting means and how teachers' language proficiency influences their confidence to teach, their pedagogical decisions and their classroom practice. To this end, teachers were interviewed by the two researchers in seven sessions. The results of their interviews were piled up in the following section's table as the reasons regarding how teachers' language proficiency may affect their teaching effectiveness. Volunteers expressed their views through face-to-face interviews. For the interview data, the researchers partly transcribed the tapes, marked the passages that seemed relevant to the research question. The analyses were divided into two different categories: a) reasons for inadequate language proficiency and b) suggestions and recommendations for teachers' language development and proficiency improvement.

Results and Discussion

This section is dedicated to find answer to the following research question which was done qualitatively.

RQ: How does teachers' language proficiency affect their teaching effectiveness?

It has been argued by many researchers that teachers' self-perceptions and beliefs can play an important role in influencing their instructional practices (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, 2005). Therefore, it seems necessary to explore what teachers' self-assessed reporting means and how teachers' language proficiency influences their confidence to teach, their pedagogical decisions and their classroom practice. To this end, teachers were selected to be interviewed. The results of their interviews were piled up in the following table as the reasons regarding how teachers' language proficiency may affect their teaching effectiveness.

Further, volunteers expressed their views through face-to-face interviews. For the interview data, the researchers partly transcribed the tapes, marked the passages that seemed relevant to the research question. The analyses were divided into two different categories: a) reasons for inadequate language proficiency and b) suggestions and recommendations for teachers' language development and proficiency improvement. It is worth

mentioning that the researchers only wrote down the most frequent and shared responses from the participants and put them in the tables as follows.

Table 1: Reasons for Inadequate Language Proficiency

No.	Reason
1	I think teachers have not received enough education during pre-service programs. They have been quickly prepared to substitute the old to-be-retired teachers.
2	I believe teachers who have joined the teaching board are so heterogeneous regarding their background and years of experience so that most of them do not have a strong base.
3	It seems that in-service programs do not provide the teachers with appropriate techniques, experience and materials
4	There seems to be poor self-monitoring on the part of the teachers. Undoubtedly this technique can promote both language proficiency and general skills.
5	Most of the teachers have entered the university for teaching education right after the nationwide university entrance exam. It seems that those who have participated in English language institute before university period, perform better and are more proficient in English language.
6	Teachers are not required by the authorities to have reflection on what they do and teach in the classroom
7	When teachers start their jobs as formal government employees, they feel as if they do not need to move further and gain better degrees. This is one of the main reasons why they do not pursue their education and every day they will be less proficient than before.
8	Rarely do I see English teachers speak to each other in English after classroom or in school office with their colleagues. They seem to be ashamed of practicing their still poor English!
9	I believe that knowing classroom management techniques is more important than being proficient. Teacher who are not familiar with classroom management techniques are considered by their students and colleagues as not proficient teachers.

As mentioned earlier, the elicited responses were divided into two different categories, including reasons for inadequate language proficiency (table 1) and suggestions and recommendations for teachers' language development and proficiency improvement which are presented in the following table.

Table 2: Suggestions and Recommendations for Teachers’ Language Development and Proficiency Improvement

No.	Suggestions and recommendations
1	Teachers' correct pronunciation and intonation can unquestionably set a role model for their students. Such a role model can build up students' confidence in learning English too. In this regard, efforts should be made on the part of the teachers to improve their own communicative competence and then equip their students with sufficient communicative competence.
2	For sure, Teachers' language proficiency is one of the standards to judge their qualifications as language teachers. It has everything to do with their teaching and students' learning. Therefore, stricter measure should be taken in pre-service programs when preparing teachers for their job
3	Teachers should provide themselves with daily studying schedule apart from what they need to study for their classrooms. This extra study keeps them up to date regarding both language proficiency and general knowledge.
4	I believe that from time to time every teacher should be observed by a professional supervisor so that he/she can pay attention to the strong and weak points of his/her teaching
5	Self-monitoring as a technique in teacher education is quite known to all. By Self-monitoring not only can teachers improve the way they teach, but also they can cover their weak points in seven mentioned skill domains leading to better language proficiency.
6	As a solution, every year teachers should take part in a general language proficiency exam so that they compare their marks and performance each time to find out their possible progress or stagnation.
7	I believe that listening is the major skill for language learning and as I have witnessed so far, most of my colleagues have difficulty understanding the native speakers’ speech to a certain degree. If teachers work on their listening skill, they can, to a great extent, develop their language proficiency since comprehension has always been considered the key to production!

In order to gain a better understanding of one’s own teaching process inside the class and one’s own strengths and weaknesses as a teacher, implementation of self-assessment seems necessary. Usharani (2012) believes

that this type of assessment assists teachers to work more on their language development. The findings of the interview support the ideas of Brutt-Griffler and Samimy (1999) and also Kamhi-Stein (2005) that teachers' self-perceptions and beliefs can play an important role in influencing their instructional practices and developing their language proficiency.

What the teacher participants mentioned about the role of self-monitoring and self-reflection of language teachers are in line in their importance with the discussions on Freeman and Richards (1996), putting an emphasis on teachers' learning while they are teaching.

What some of the teachers emphasized about the pre-service and in-service teacher training programs are supported in details by claims of Scannell (2012). He maintains that alternative teacher education programs are often created in response to a shortage of teachers from traditional programs, but more often are the outcomes of dissatisfaction with the quality of graduates of different programs.

All in all, it seems that one of the best strategies for teachers to develop their language proficiency begins long before they start their teaching, before entering university and while they are in a university pursuing their education.

Conclusion and Implications

The present research was an attempt to provide answer to the following research question:

RQ: How does teachers' language proficiency affect their teaching effectiveness?

As to the above mentioned research question, analysis of the interviews showed that all the teachers unanimously believed that English language proficiency is considered crucial for teaching effectiveness, though some of them put an emphasis on the complementary role of level of language proficiency and knowing classroom management techniques.

By having a look at the two tables provided for the research question, it can be concluded that teachers unanimously agreed that language proficiency was considered one of their biggest concerns in becoming qualified language teachers and that an adequate level of language proficiency was essential for productive language teaching. All teachers expressed their support for a more communicative curriculum and come up to the importance of teachers' communicative competence as it directly can affect their teaching effectiveness and also their students' communicative competence.

According to Fahim, Hamidi and Najafi Sarem (2013), self-monitoring as a means of observation gives teachers proper respect and appropriate understanding of what they do when teaching. Therefore, through assessing themselves, teachers will be able to find out their strengths and weakness. By working on their weaknesses and bridging the gap between what they are and what they should be, they can improve their teaching quality and self-efficacy. Research has shown that teachers' self-efficacy is directly related to students' academic success (Khatib, Sarem & Hamidi, 2012). Therefore, any improvement on the part of the teachers by self-assessment will have positive effects on students' learning outcomes.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Interpretations of the findings of this research also led to several suggestions for further researches.

1. Learners may benefit more from teachers who implement self-assessment techniques in their classrooms. It is suggested that a study be done regarding the effect of self-assessment on increasing learner motivation.
2. This study was conducted in Golestan province, in the North of Iran. The present study can be duplicated nationwide over a longer period of time. It can also be carried out in different learning contexts such as schools, institutes and universities.
3. This research focused on both male and female teachers as participants. The role of the gender was not under investigation here. Another study considering the role of gender may provide us with further insight in this area.
4. It is suggested that a research study be carried out in order to find out the differences existing between the perceived current and the desired proficiency levels in each of the seven skill domains (listening comprehension, speaking ability, reading comprehension, writing ability, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar).

References

- Abdolmanafi Rokni, S.J., Hamidi, H., & Gorgani, T. (2014). Investigating the relationship between emotional intelligence and language achievement: A case of TEFL and Non-TEFL university students. *International Journal of Language Learning and Applied Linguistics World*, 5(3), 117-127.
- Brutt-Griffler, J. & Samimy, K.K. (1999). Revisiting the colonial in the postcolonial: critical praxis for nonnative-English-speaking teachers in a TESOL program. *TESOL Quarterly*, 33, 413-431.
- Butler, Y., & Lee, J. (2010). The effects of self-assessment among young learners of English. *Language Testing*, 27(1), 5-31
- Chen, Y. (2008). Learning to self-assess oral performance in English: A longitudinal case study. *Language Testing*, 12(2), 235-262
- Cheng, W. (2005). Peer assessment of language proficiency. *Language Testing*, 22(1), 91-121.
- Fahim, M., Hamidi, H., & Sarem, S.N. (2013). Investigating the role of teachers self-monitoring in the learners' willingness to communicate: A case of Iranian EFL learners. *Journal of Language Teaching and Research*, 4(3), 624-635.
- Freeman, D. & Richards, J. (1996). *Teacher learning in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kamhi-Stein, L.D. (2005). Research perspectives on non-native English-speaking educators. In P. Bruthiaux et al. (Eds.), *Directions in applied linguistics: essays in honor of Robert B. Kaplan* (pp. 72-87). Buffalo: Multilingual Matters.

- Khatib, M., Sarem, S.N., & Hamidi, H. (2012). A critical look at the effect of teachers' self-efficacy on students' academic success. *Iranian EFL Journal*, 8(5), 295-306.
- Lynch, B.K. (2001). Rethinking assessment from a critical perspective. *Language Testing*, 18(4), 351-372.
- Moradi, F. (1996). *An Investigation into the Problems of Teaching & Learning English in Tehran Province*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Shiraz University, Shiraz.
- Rashidi, N. (1995). *Teaching and Learning English in Guidance and High School in Kordestan: Problems and Suggested Solutions*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, Shiraz University, Shiraz.
- Richards, J.C. (1990). *The language teaching matrix*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Scannell, P.D. (2012). Models of teacher education. Retrieved December 20, 2013, from <http://www.search-document.com>.
- Usharani, P.M. (2012). Self-monitoring: A strategy for teacher development. *MJAL*, 4(1), 36-44.
- Wang, Z. (1999). Trends of ELT in China. *Foreign Languages*, 6, 36-41.
- Yarmohammadi, L. (2000). Reflections on the Treatment and Contextualization of Pronunciation Practices and Language Functions in the Pre-university textbooks in Iran. *Journal of Teaching Languages*, 1(3) 1-21.