

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. 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.

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

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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'. 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.

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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. 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). 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. 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. 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. 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. 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.

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