



EFL Teachers Reflecting on their English Proficiency

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ABSTRACT

This article is a mix of an exploratory and an autoethnography paper in which the co-authors share their reflections on their English proficiency after years of experience in the profession. The co-authors considered reflecting on their English proficiency is not only out of personal experience, rather than it's a common subject of discussion in teachers' room everywhere. This mouthful generalization is supported by the situational evidence the co-authors are part of, besides their hearsay of many teachers from their circles of acquaintance. Additionally and besides the informal narrative setting of the article, the formal take is also there involving the linguistics and the domains sociolinguistics domains. Whereas, the format of the article as a narrative inquiry discussion, is an open multi paragraphs rather than multi sections as it is with autoethnography ones; with the last one concluding with a few takeaways.

INTRODUCTION

Background

The co-authors of this article could be among the lucky Arabic speaking EFL teachers, having published multiple papers on EFL so far; both individually and as a group. Why so lucky? The reasons are threefold. First, it's because the proportion of the published studies is globally a key criterion of ranking colleges, and by association, the quality of their faculty members. Secondly, it is because not all the universities –and definitely not schools, encourage their teaching staffs to write and publish papers; like ours at Jazan University. It is for this reason that the 22 Arab countries lag behind by the QS World University Rankings institution with the highest being Qatar and yet standing at 112th out of 350 countries worldwide (QS Org, 2021). This is just how broad the subject of teachers reflecting on their EFL proficiency can take us,

and how diverse the sub-topics it may raise. This is positive though, for it enriches what would otherwise seem a limp narration or mere chit chat.

Problem statement

With the ever expanding English on one hand, and the reality of the teachers' redundant role of teaching the curricula, EFL teachers would want to check on their stance. In fact, this is one of the subjects in the teacher-teacher "chit chats" and the co-authors of this article are no exception. However, the co-authors decided to take this teachers' room talk a step farther by formulating it into a formal discourse that could yet cater for further full scholarly study. So, even though this is not necessarily the issue of the co-authors -who are all published researchers, they intended it for sharing their experiences and concerns with fellow FEL teachers throughout the Arabic world. Additionally, the concept of English proficiency itself is a bit vague especially in the context of MA and BHD degree holders such as the college teachers. For some teachers the bar of English proficiency may mean achieving a near-native level, for some it maybe by scoring the Advance Level of CEFR, and for others it's why bother reflecting on their English in such an "academic" way, at all. In fact it is around such exchanges that the arguments develop into the article.

Objective of the article

Formulating the variant perspectives through which different teachers reflect on their English proficiency into a viable narrative, is the key objective of this article. The process requires accommodating as many views by the narrators as well as entertaining their hearsay of teachers outside the community of Jazan University. Through the process, the narrators attempt to answer the following questions through the discussion:

- How common is it for EFL teachers to reflect on their English proficiency?
- Is advancing English proficiency as essential as maintaining it for EFL teachers?
- What gains do EFL teachers attain in maintaining high level of English proficiency?
- How differently do teachers boost their English proficiency compared to students?

METHOD

As a narrative-driven article, it involves a mix of an exploratory and an autoethnography approach by which the co-researchers share their personal experiences on what they perceive as an existing issue. Both the exploratory and the autoethnography exploratory methods share the characteristics of being flexible, barely structured and narrative format of writing, while ideally suit an article. However and out of the co-researchers' keenness of producing an informative rather than a mere narrative essay, the article is enhanced with supporting literature. The presumed participants in this study is the population of Arabic speaking EFL teachers who teach in one of the 22 Arab countries. While some of these teaches are expats in a country other than theirs, some are teaching in their home countries. The participants are all MA and BHD holders with years of teaching experience rather than entry level ones. They include the co-researchers of this article as direct participants as well as direct participants involving teachers from their circle of acquaintance they are aware of and share their stories.

DISCUSSION

It seems to be the problem of the global EFL community throughout the three continents and each has a whole literature joining the teachers to the concerns about their level of proficiency. This was a note by Teacher Fatima who commend the bliss of Jazan University having this multi-national faculty of both Arabic and non-Arabic speakers. The Chinese EFL population situation for example, is addressed in a study by Choi & Lee; 2016, and Tsang; 2017, the Indonesian by Nugroho; 2018, the Brazilian by Rodelfo; 2018, and so forth. Meaning, the exception of the two of the world's 5 continents –Europe and North America, is only for it is where native English countries exist or due to the geographic influence of these native English nations. Teacher Amani interjected by saying, “these studies and several others bear some factors of variance and relativity, though”. She referred to the Brazilian paradigm discussed by Rodelfo; 2018, sets the bar of what level of English proficiency can be deemed as below or above. The study of Rodelfo is much of a reprimand he loads on his fellow Brazilian English teachers for showing such modest levels while their Latin language constitutes one-third (1/3) of English. This is in line with ETS data; 2023, stats reporting Brazil averaging approximately 87 to 90 in TOEFL iBT test. So, if such is the situation in South America, it is expected to be lower than this Brazilian bar. A confirmation to this assumption comes from Choi & Lee (2016) who state that, 48% of the Chinese teachers in the country's international schools, are not up to the expectations of the national educational quality standards. Among the issues this study raises, is the laxity among the teachers in improving their English pronunciation. While Teacher Naglai interjected by saying that, “international schools' L1 curricula taught in L2 environments necessarily have local teaching staff members”, and refers to the Indonesian situation is no less problematic according to Nugroho (2018). According to the paper even the parents complain about the school teachers in particular, prompting the educational authorities to impose an additional teachers' certification. The Arab world as an EFL region extending through two of the 5 continents, Africa and Asia, shouldn't be an exception to this global EFL situation. Teacher Nahid refers From this overview of the global EFL community situation, it can be concluded that the issue of EFL teachers' incompetent proficiency is common enough as to concern the teachers themselves before the educational systems.

“Why don't the teachers promote their level of EFL proficiency or at least keep it up to the international standards,” a rhetorical question posed by Teacher Amani. One reason cited from the literature by Choi & Lee (2016) is that, a great of the teachers are just satisfied with competently assuming their teaching responsibility and this is fair enough to clear their conscience. The article cross-quotes a teacher making the remark, “with all the family responsibilities and the errands a teacher has to attend to in their daily life, the lack of room is justifiable”. Whereas, some view it is rather a luxury for the teacher to achieve such proficient level of English. A proponent of this opinion is the columnist at the Egyptian Al Ahram Daily; 14,12, 2022 issue stating that, “they key point here is that the English language teacher keeps a pace ahead of his students”. This odd view is concordant with that by that Teacher Fatima quoted, “we have to remember the fact that these teachers are degree holders, certified and the teaching experience. He then goes on to argue that, neither is it common among the people of other professions realizing a near-native level of proficiency”. On the other hand, Wulyani & et al (2019) believe that, people should differentiate between the different aspects of proficiency; whether it is eloquence, size of vocabulary or quality of writing. Then goes on as to say it shouldn't be a must for every teacher to excel at each and every one of these competencies. While Teacher Nagla reports a teacher she knows saying, “being able to catch up with native English conversation and responding decently is enough; not necessarily as eloquence. A point to clarify here is that, the teaching profession may constitute an area of proficiency by itself if we consider the theories, concepts and vocabulary of pedagogy. This last statement almost got our consensus especially if the teacher is engaged in curriculum development of multi educational schools or levels.

“Why and how would the teachers promote their level of EFL proficiency? A question raised by Nagla as a shifter for moving the discussion to the next premise. One justification is conceited for the literature is by Tsang (2017) that, learning any language at all, is a continuous process and the English teachers too are expected to keep up with an up to date. While Fareh (2010) looks at it through the broader perspective, our

Arab society is a cross-culture zone and it looks up English teachers as conveyers to the world. A similar view is shared by Fareh (2010) arguing that, in the normal situation an English teacher has a communal role to play such as that we often see in Kenya and other poor countries. Fatima argued, “no such function of Arabic language is needed in the Arab societies where the national language isn’t that alien to the regional dialects. Yet, the article associating English teachers with contribution to the national development by efforts such as liaising among the locals of variant dialects is understandable. Another justification of why English teachers’ proficiency is necessary is contributed by Eslami & Fatahi (2008) that, English should be viewed as a means and not a goal by itself, and this should push the teacher’s horizon of aspirations. From the linguistic perspective on how teachers can advance and/or maintain their English proficiency, the article by Smadi & Al-Ghazo (2013) sets what it considers a foundational matter. The article argues that, aptitude is foundational in how far a person can advance his/her English proficiency, which not all of them enjoy. In the course of the discussion the article refers to Gregg’s; 1990, variance in acquiring the four language skills to conclude it also applies to furthering them. A supporting view to this one is by Gregg; 1990, that proficient EFL individuals can be outstanding orators, excellent writers, but not necessarily both. This view aggress with the linguistic fact pointed out by Dewaele & et al (2018). The takeaway from this discussion is the factors of why and how English teachers may advance their English level of proficiency include: the teacher’s personality, the role they assume as well as their environment. These factors can be tabulated in the table below:

The Factors of Maintaining and advancing English proficiency

Teacher’s Aptitude	Teacher’s Role	The Environment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Habitual/emotional attachment to English ● Deliberate effort in advancing English ● Having long-term aspirations to achieve. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Level of teaching (school vs. college). ● The major(s) the teacher teaches. ● Relevance of the role to writing and/or research. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Space of socializing with English speakers. ● Affiliation with external English community ● Contribution in social media –not as browser only.

Extending a recommendation here, comes as a part of the objectives of this article that we stated earlier; which is a full study to be developed out of this article. Agreeably, the Gulf region’s would be the ideal geographic scope for such study since it is a hub hosting English teachers from almost all the 22 Arab countries as well as non-Arab from all the five continents of the world.

CONCLUSION

Five key conclusions can be drawn from the narrators’ reflection their English proficiency as of the urge of maintaining and/or advancing it. First, proficiency is a multi-faceted potential that a teacher should identify at which one(s) she/he excels; namely, fluent speaker, outstanding orator, excellent. Meaning a teacher may or may not equally combine them, but this is above enjoying a decent level of proficiency at all of them. Secondly, this subject of reflection is found exist throughout the global EFL community, and not restricted to the Arab world. Thirdly, teachers’ English proficiency is and should be of concern for non-academic reasons just as it is for the academic ones since English should be viewed as a means and not as goal by itself. Fourthly and in line with the preceding conclusion, the teacher’s role may ideally extend outside the premise/campus to include communal or national roles. Fifthly, the teacher’s personality, i.e., aptitude, habitual and emotional attachment to English is pivotal out of the three factors impacting the teacher’s effort in maintaining and/or advancing her/his proficiency.

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