

An Exploration of Nonnative English Speaking (NNES) EFL Teachers' Perceived Language Proficiency and Self-efficacy in an off-Campus English Language Training Institution in Xiamen

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Abstract: *In the realm of education, teachers' perceptions or beliefs have been one of the main topics that researchers have focused on over the past four decades (Ghasemboland & Hashim, 2013). For nonnative English speaking teachers, level of English proficiency is often a matter of concern and it has close relationship with their beliefs about teaching abilities, which is known as self-efficacy (Faez, Karas & Uchihara, 2021). This study aims to explore the nonnative English speaking (NNES) EFL teachers' perceived English proficiency and its impact on their self-efficacy of teaching in an off-campus English training institution in Xiamen, a sub-provincial city in southeastern Fujian, China. The institution has an English only policy for both teachers and students to use English at all times, in order to create an English immersion environment for students. Teachers' special needs for language training were also interviewed as well. Semi-structured face-to-face individual interview is the only method implemented in this study, in which the interview questions were designed drawing on prior research and the Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001). The results showed that the teachers's self-efficacy was positively correlated with their self-perceived English proficiency, which concurs with the previous studies, and that teachers have strong needs for development in language proficiency to improve their self-efficacy of teaching.*

Keywords: *nonnative English speaking (NNES) EFL teachers, self-efficacy, perceived language proficiency, off-campus English language training institution*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, many people who tend to apply to university abroad study English at off-campus institutions because they provide different test preparation courses for them (TOEFL test preparation, IELTS preparation, GMAT preparation, BEC English exam preparation, etc.), which are not currently included in the academic curriculum in public high school that are managed, maintained, and funded by the government. Some of these institutions implement the English only policy, which is both for teachers and students to use English at all times in order to create an English immersion environment for learners. It is believed that if students study at school with enough exposure to authentic English speaking environment or chances to interact using English, they acquire English faster. The idea of English only policy is supported by Krashen and Terrell (1996)'s argument that the one's acquisition is based on what he hears and understands for the exposure is very important as the determining factor for learning (Ellis, 2008).

Undoubtedly, teachers play significant role in the educational system. They impart knowledge to students and set up a situation in which students can and will learn effectively. During a lesson, teachers help students by giving good, clear instructions in order to ensure that all the activities run smoothly. Nonnative English speaking EFL teachers constitute the majority of teaching staffs in the off-campus English training institution. Considering the policy mentioned above, a high level of competence and proficiency in English seems a prerequisite for the course those teachers present for the reason that they are not only teaching the knowledge of (or about) English language but also using it as a medium in the class. Having taught English at one English training institution for several years, the researcher found that even though all her colleagues had passed the English tests that could prove their competence in English, some of them, every now and then, had a feeling of doubt and uncertainty of their capability of teaching English, and "it has something to do with their perception of English proficiency",

quoted from one of her colleagues.

This study aimed to interview nonnative English speaking EFL teachers, asking about their self-perceived English proficiency and self-efficacy of teaching, as well as their needs for training related to language proficiency. The research was conducted at one off-campus English training institution in Xiamen, Fujian Province in Mainland China. Research questions are as follows:

- 1). How do nonnative English teachers perceive their current English proficiency and level of confidence to teaching English in English?
- 2). What do nonnative English teachers need to enhance their self-efficacy of teaching English?

The interview questions of this study were designed by drawing on the previous research. Data generated from teachers in this study might give implications for English educators designing teachers training programme and benefit English teachers' self-improvement in the future.

2. Literature

In the realm of education, teachers' perceptions or beliefs have been one of the main topics that researchers have focused on over the past four decades (Ghasemolani & Hashim, 2013). It seems that a nonnative English speaking EFL teacher with high level of confidence of teaching and proficiency in English would take students a successful class, what's the relationship between these two? Research shows that teacher's perception of his/ her ability to successfully accomplish teaching task mainly based on perceived competence rather than actual level competence (Ghasemolani & Hashim, 2013), which highlights the significance of teacher's perception in educational area.

Teachers' self-efficacy is how teachers perceive their ability to deal with the teaching tasks, obligations, and challenges. It has an important impact on student's academic achievement and motivation, as well as well-being in the working environment (Barni, Danioni & Benevene, 2019). The Teachers' Sense of Efficacy Scale (TSES; Tschannen-Moran & Woolfolk Hoy, 2001), a prominent measure, is used by teachers to evaluate the likelihood of their success in teaching. This measure is closely related to three factors including efficacy for Classroom Management (CM), Efficacy to promote Student Engagement (SE), and Efficacy in using Instructional Strategies (IS). (Duffin, French & Patrick, 2012). The previous research conducted to probe teachers' self-efficacy suggests that it has close relationship with instructional practices, classroom behavior and students' achievement (Eslami & Fatahi), and the first one requires teacher to have good spoken English otherwise he/she can't even give instructions in English. Thus, language proficiency really matters for nonnative English speaking (NNES) EFL teachers because they are not only teaching the knowledge of English, but also using English as a medium in the class.

Language proficiency (LP) is one of the most significant features that characterizes a good teacher (Lange, 1990). The definition of it has been changed in many researchers' mind over time. Limited in linguistic area, it was discussed by earlier linguists (Chomsky, 1965; Lado, 1961; Carroll, 1968) without referring to educational context. Later, as linguist theories had been applied into education, emerging research put emphasis on second language teaching. When talking about the definition of teachers' LP, some researchers alluded to difficulty to set a standard type and the level of it due to the different factors when considering educational context (Elder & Kim, 2014). Nevertheless, in the foreign language context, language proficiency of teachers included as one key aspect of subject knowledge refers to the 'knowledge competence or ability in the use of a language', which is by Bachman (1990). Being able to use the language for communicative purposes in different situations is very crucial to a foreign language teacher. The significant role of language proficiency is highlighted by a number of scholars, stating that a good command of target language characterizes an excellent foreign language teachers (Shin, 2008) and it will always represent a strong basis for the nonnative teachers' professional confidence (Murdoch, 1994). It is argued that teaching procedure would be hampered if they had poor language proficiency (Cullen, 2002). Farrel and Richards (2007) notes that teachers with low level language proficiency cannot find out students' errors and even produce wrong language themselves their professional status. Teachers speaking fluent English are capable of coming across interesting and appropriate topics for students with different level, easily solving communicative problems immediately and scaffolding the learners in FL speech. Tsui (2003) conducted a comparison research showing that teachers with less subject knowledge, teachers with more subject knowledge are able to reject unsuitable aspects of the textbook and offer alternative activities for development and practice, rather than just following text books. Since the importance of language proficiency in teaching process has been pointed out by a large majority of

studies, it is reasonable to take it into account when teachers are asked to perceive their capability of teaching.

Growing body of research have been done to explore the relationship between language proficiency and teachers' self-efficacy. Ellis (2008) stated that language proficiency and teachers' self-efficacy have close but indirect relationship, and the strength of which is dependent on the extent to which individuals are able to perform what they believe. The research conducted by Ghasemboland and Hashim (2013) illustrated more details, indicating that teachers who rated their English proficiency higher in four skills (reading, listening, writing and speaking) had stronger belief in ability of teaching English. An English teacher in an interview expressed that he concern about his language skills at first when starting to teach English, later he became more confident in teaching as language proficiency developed (Richards and Farrell, 2011), which concurs with the findings of previous studies.

Although many studies have been done to investigate the relationship, most of them were done in public school.

English teachers working in off-campus institutions are somehow neglected in research. Besides, their voice for language training to improve and increase their self-efficacy should also be heard.

Academics have concerned some ELT teachers about their unsatisfactory linguistic standards (e.g. Butler, 2004; Freeman et al. al., 2015). Although English language proficiency has been widely regarded as paramount importance for English teachers, the disappointing reality present is that most of language teachers are not able to teach their language well (Richard, 2017). Many research have been conducted corresponding to English teachers' language proficiency, indicating their limitations in this area. What indicates from Wall's (2008) findings of Thailand English teachers' performance on TKT result was that they had ambivalent understanding of teaching principles. Besides, all the teachers doing TKT test considered linguistic aspect as their difficulties. Similarly, considerable gaps were reported by teachers in Butler (2004)'s research pointing out the discrepancies between their self-evaluated language proficiency and the level they need to achieve for teaching English effectively.

In many ESL settings where teachers are supposed to use target language, the occurrence of excessive L1, difficulties of giving instruction, as well as deficiency of language knowledge were stated by several researchers (Li, 2003; Rao, 1996; Littlewood, 2007; Samimy & Kobayaski 2004; Freeman, Katz, Gomez & Burns, 2015; Muhammad, 2017).

In many areas of the world, particularly in which English is not a medium for communication. Cullen (1994) discovered that what interests English teachers was the need to improve their language proficiency. Tang (2007) conducted a study to investigate Chinese secondary school teachers' perception about their language proficiency for the purpose of probing teachers' needs for professional development in terms of language competence. Lack of language proficiency for English teaching complained by participants in this study indicates that English teachers have strong desire for more corresponding development program. What concurs with these ideas appeared in Birbirso's (2014) research which asks Ethiopian EFL teachers about factors that resulted to their poor levels, among which English proficiency ranks the highest.

3. Methodology

This section will introduce the whole procedure of current study which is an inquiry-based research, including research design, data collection and data analysis. The information of research participants will be displayed in form of table. Besides, consideration and limitation will be mentioned at the end of this section as well.

3.1. Research design

Qualitative research is an inquiry-based research employed to probe trends in thought and opinions. According to Palmer and Bolderston (2006) qualitative research interprets the subjective experiences of the participants in an attempt to gain some insight into certain social phenomena with the perception of behavioral definitions and attitude. The present study adopted individual semi-structured interview to investigate English teachers' perceived language proficiency and self-efficacy, as well as their needs for improving level of confidence in English teaching. Tuckman (1972) stated that interview could be used in research as an access to an individual's head, gathering information about his/her values and preferences, attitudes and beliefs. More importantly, unexpected results might occur through interview

(Kerlinger, 1970).

The nonnative English speaking teachers who participated in this research were asked several open questions regarding level of confidence to teaching English with current language proficiency and their needs for improving level of self-efficacy in teaching. Sample question 1 to sample question 3 aim to know the participants' perception of their language proficiency. Borrowing the idea from the Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale, the sample question 4 to sample question 6 are designed to ask all participants to describe their level of confidence when it comes to teaching English in English and how their language proficiency affect the teaching process. The sample question 7 to sample question 10 tends to know nonnative English speaking teacher's attitude towards the importance of language proficiency in the foreign language context, and explore their special needs for the teacher professional development languages programme. All teachers were interviewed and answered in Chinese separately with no time limits. It took two hours to complete the whole procedure. Conversations were audio-recorded.

3.2. Research participants

10 teachers working in the selected English training institution were invited to be interviewed for this study. They were chosen as research subjects for the following reasons. Firstly, all participants are nonnative English speaking teachers, despite that, they majored in English at university and passed the test for English Majors-Band 8 (TEM-8), the highest level for English major students in China, which evidently proves that they all have actual good level competence in English. Secondly, all participants have experience of teaching English as foreign language. They were informed of purpose of this study and asked for consent to join. For assurance of confidentiality, participants' personal information has been removed. A table of participants' information was as follows:

Table 1: Information of English teachers (pseudonyms)

Pseudonyms	Teaching experience (year)
Shirley	2 years
Sherry	1 year
Anna	1 year and a half
Sandy	2 years
Malik	1 year and 5 months
Christina	1 year
Naomi	1 year and 3 months
Cheryl	10 months
Natalie	1 year
Jannie	2 years

3.3. Data collection

Semi-structured face-to-face individual interview is the only method for data collection in this study. First, the semi-structured interview is more powerful than other types of interviews for qualitative research because it allows for researchers to acquire in-depth information and evidence from interviewees while considering the focus of the study. Second, it allows flexibility and adaptability for researchers to hold their track as compared to an unstructured interview, where its direction is not fully considered. This article uses extensive literature reviews related to the methodological reflections of researchers in qualitative research. Hence, the semi-structured interview could potentially enable qualitative researchers to amend their research questions throughout their studies while maintaining their track.

Interview questions of this study were designed by referring to Teacher Sense of Efficacy Scale, which is a measure of people's evaluations of their own likely success in teaching. In this measure, teaching is conceptualized as a complex activity and represents teacher efficacy as a multi-faceted construct. All interviewees were asked the same set of questions in the same order so that the reliability and validity of data can be guaranteed (Lindl & Taylor, 2002). The researcher will prepare prompts in case of difficulties.

3.4. Data analysis

Conversations between participants and researcher were recorded. After interview, recordings were carefully listened to and transcribed verbatim. All the data had been interpreted and analyzed, frequently uttered words were noted down and classified into specific category in a table for organization.

Afterwards, the codes were assigned into different themes. The whole process has been repeatedly checked during the procedures.

Based on the definition chosen in the study, a few interview questions were designed to ask teachers' perception of language proficiency with regards to general proficiency such as their receptive and productive skills, and specific skills and knowledge. To collect data about teachers' self-efficacy to teaching English, the study selected interview questions according to teachers' sense of efficacy scale. Besides, the study further asked all teachers whether they need any professional development to improve their level of confidence in teaching English.

3.5. Ethical approval

The study was conducted when principal and all English teachers of selected training institution had voluntarily signed the consent form before the interview. They were informed that conversations would be audio-recorded, and that they had right to review and erase the audio records which would be stored in pass-word protected computer until the research was completed. The personal identifier was removed for long term retention of the research data. The pseudonyms were used in the study.

3.6. Limitation

First, the validity can't be sure. Although the study was conducted in pseudonym, teachers who were encouraged to reflect their actual thoughts might still just response with 'socially desirable' answers to the research (Nederhof, 1985). Moreover, interviewees' answers could be influenced by timing, current state of mind, etc. It is also possible that some teachers might not want to acknowledge their actual level of language proficiency. Last but not least, the study is of limitation in terms of its scope. Therefore, the findings of it could not be regarded as representative and generalizable enough.

4. Results

4.1. Teachers self-perceived English proficiency and self-efficacy to teaching English

Teachers evaluated their English proficiency regarding productive skills and receptive skills in response to the first two questions. The majority of teachers (n=8) felt confident in talking with foreigners for 'they had enough vocabulary for daily-life topics' whereas another two (Naomi, Cheryl) felt nervous as both perceived themselves not being able to speak English fluently. Among all teachers, Naomi and Anna expressed their problem of pronunciation as they alluded to their thick accent which reduces confidence of teaching phonics. As for writing skill, except Jannie who had no confidence due to unconsolidated knowledge of grammar, others did not face any big problem. Regarding reading and listening skill, it seemed that all teachers were confident about them.

Additionally, all teachers, mentioned that 'they were not familiar with idioms, English culture, which reduced their confidence as being English teachers to some degree. T4 emphasized the importance of having English-culture knowledge:

I think it's very important for a teacher having broad English-culture knowledge. Students will be more interested in your lessons and keep your pace rather than getting distracted by others because what you teach is not only limited to content in text book.

As for question about teaching English in English, all teachers thought that they were not confident enough of discourse competence that requires for effective delivery of the lesson content. It was found that teaching grammar and giving instruction in English are two main aspects that teachers are not so confident with.

4.1.1. Teaching grammar in English

Teaching grammar in English is a challenge for all teachers due to their insufficient knowledge about language and teaching experience, which is proved by Shirley, Malik, Naomi, Natalie and Cheryl who stated that 'they had been taught grammar in Chinese for years and had no any experience in teaching grammar in English'. Added to that, Jannie pointed out her unfamiliarity with grammar terms in English and their usage. Personal experiences were shared by other teachers:

I once worked in an English training institute where teachers were required to mainly focuses on teaching grammar, but I am not an expert on that so I don't feel very confident to teach my students.

(Naomi)

I am not really good at teaching grammar, so I am always in doubt myself whether I teach students the right grammar rules. (Cheryle)

T2 thought that even though she mastered English grammar, training course on consolidating grammar knowledge and provision of methods of using appropriate language to teach grammar is necessary for teachers. The advice is supported by Malik who argued that it was difficult to teach grammar in Chinese, not to mention in a second language.

4.1.2. Giving instruction in English

Data generated from teachers suggests that they are in short of approach of giving instruction in English, including, giving feedback, providing an alternative word explanation, explaining rules of activity, etc.

Malik said that if students did not understand what teacher expressed, it meant nothing. Christina further suggested that English-only policy in classroom required her ability of giving feedback to students in English immediately, however, she felt hard to approach that level due to her poor level of discourse competence. Other teachers expressed their worries about explaining English words in English as well. Examples were given as follows:

I don't feel confident in explaining vocabulary to my students because you have to think of other English words to explain that word but sometimes I just can't think of them at that moment. (Anna)

In most cases I can understand the word in textbook but it is a totally different thing if you need to explain that word in English and make that comprehensible to students, which really bothers me. (Natalie)

I passed English test like TEM8, which means I have a good command of English, but I feel difficult in teaching vocabulary and explaining games rules, because for those young children, you need to use some specific instructional language in classroom to have them understand. To some degree, lack of knowledge about giving instruction reduces my confidence when I teach English. (Shirley)

1 also stated that 'teacher's level of confidence in teaching English has relation to English fluency' by sharing her personal experience:

Sometimes I can't speak English fluently, so I don't feel very confident that my students can understand me, also, I am worried that my instructions were not so clear that my students are not willing to listen to me, especially for very young kids. I think if I have higher level language proficiency, I have more confidence in their sitting arrangements and their attention.

Regarding the second research question, all teachers perceived language proficiency was an indispensable element contributed to teacher's self-efficacy in English teaching and believed that it should be developed continually.

Regarding self-efficacy to teaching English, the teachers argued that English proficiency had closer relationship with instructional strategies than class management and student engagement. Meanwhile, they felt more confident in classroom management and student engagement, but felt least confident in instructional strategies with their current English proficiency.

4.1.3. English teachers' needs for training programme related to language proficiency

Having mentioned various difficulties in English teaching, most teachers have strong desire to take training courses. They are willing to have more chance to learn idioms, knowledge in relation to English culture and history. They would love to have more discussion with foreign teachers on those topics as Christina remarked: "I can learn English culture from books, but I wish there would be more opportunity to discuss them with foreign teachers in our academic team."

Besides, some teachers also realized lack of knowledge about linguistics. Naomi stated that 'teachers are models that students might imitate and their language proficiency has significant impact on students' learning achievement, as well as their own self-efficacy'. She required to attend lectures of linguistics for English teachers' profession. This is in line with Anna, who pointed out teacher's importance of teachers' language proficiency by giving following statement:

If an English teacher feel confident in his language proficiency, students will admire him as he presents an optimistic attitude to students, which brings positive effect. Take myself as an example, I speak English with strong accent, this reduce my confidence in teaching students' pronunciation because

I am afraid of giving them bad example. Therefore, I really want to take training courses that could help my pronunciation.

Jannie shared the same idea with Naomi when recalling her experience in writing class:

“I think my writing skill is not that good, and this affects my confidence of having writing class for my students because I am not sure that if I gave the exactly right rules of writing.”

Second, data generated from teachers (e.g. Anna, Malik, Christina, Natalie) demonstrated that they were in need of provision of knowledge about giving instruction in English. Some teachers claimed that their English level is professional enough to teach contents in textbook. However, teachers had no confidence in subject-matter knowledge, such as instructional language that students can understand given their limited vocabulary.

Usually I demonstrate for my students with gestures or some simple words instead of explaining the game rules with complicated sentence because their vocabulary is too limited understand me. Although I've been working for years, I still need to improve on it. (Anna)

If my students are in college, they might have much higher expectations on me in terms of language proficiency. As for children, we also need to be expertise on giving instruction in English. (Malik)

It's necessary to have training course of giving instruction in English. I have little knowledge of it, which caused me nervous at first. The more uncomfortable I am, the more complicated sentences I used, which confused my students all the time. If I am master of it, I would be more confident in my class. (Christina)

I would love to participate training activities that can enlarge vocabulary involved with idioms, so that I can share them with my students. (Natalie)

5. Discussion

In relation to the teachers' perceived English proficiency, it is noted that teachers in the present study shared the same experience with those in previous research. For example, most teachers perceived themselves performed well in receptive skills such as reading and listening but not really good at productive skills such as speaking and writing skills. This concurs with findings in previous research (Lee, 2009). A possible reason for this could be teachers' past English education that mainly focused on reading comprehension.

In Wall's (2008) research, low level of proficiency in linguistic aspect was proposed. Similarly, a few teachers in current study also pointed out their lack of grammar knowledge, which suggests the necessity of further development in this area.

According to Chacón (2002), the ability of speaking is one factor that affects teacher's confidence in English teaching. Data generated from present study adds to validity of the statement in that language deficiency in speaking mentioned by teachers somehow made them feel a bit nervous when giving students immediate feedback, or communicating with students on some interesting topics.

Moreover, the deficiency of English-culture knowledge such as idioms, slangs was emphasized by every teacher in current study, which was not mentioned in previous ones.

Given special context in which English is the only language that could be used, language proficiency in terms of instructional language is perceived as a challenge for English teachers. The English-only policy requires teachers to be capable of imparting contents in English efficiently. Mitchell (1998) also stated that English teachers' language proficiency was the basic skill by which teachers could be able to teach under improvisational situation. However, teachers in current study thought that they were not professional in this area, which results in carrying out tasks without confidence, such as explaining rules of lesson activity, engaging students, etc.

According to teacher's required needs for improvement, the study found that English proficiency was a major part that teachers mainly required for improving their confidence in teaching English. Thus, the relationship between perceived language proficiency and self-efficacy of teaching English was proved. In other words, some aspects of language proficiency that teachers perceived as not being competent enough is what they need for self-efficacy of teaching English, which is in line with previous studies that indicated significant influence of perceived language proficiency on teacher's self-efficacy (Chacon, 2002; Shim, 2001; Ghasemboland & Hashim, 2013). The present study showed that some teachers who

have more confidence in their language proficiency also have more confidence in self-efficacy of teaching. For example, T2 and T4 believed that they were good at all areas of English, so that they felt very confident in teaching it whereas participants (e.g. Anna, Christina, Naomi, Jannie) who perceived themselves as not being professional in particular area (e.g. phonics, grammar, instructional language, etc.) had lower level of confidence in teaching relevant contents.

The current findings supplement previous studies, indicating that English teachers have the strongest feelings to take training course of instructional approach, followed by English culture, knowledge of idioms, grammar and pronunciation. Due to the increasing demands for English proficiency (Niu & Wolff, 2003), all these aspects were mentioned by teachers that influenced their confidence in teaching English. Therefore, educators who design teacher's professional development programme are suggested to take them into consideration to enhance English teacher's proficiency and self-efficacy.

Ghasemboland and Hashim's (2013) research showed high relationship between teacher's perceived English proficiency levels and three dimensions of self-efficacy including student engagement, class management and instructional strategies. Put differently, most teachers in present study, except T1 and T3, came up with the idea that language proficiency had more significant influence on teacher's confidence in instructional approach than student engagement and classroom management in that the former one requires more proficiency than the other two. Although not being really confident in language proficiency, a majority of participants believed that they can easily handle problem of student engagement and class management.

6. Conclusion

The current study explored teacher's perceived language proficiency as well as teacher's need for language proficiency development for self-efficacy. The finding shows that they are confident in language aspects but not that confident in their discourse competence that requires for effective delivery of the lesson content, that is instructional language. The study also finds that teachers who believed themselves have high level of language proficiency tended to be more confident in English teaching, which concurs with previous studies that indicates significant relationship between perceived English proficiency and self-efficacy of English teaching. All teachers in this study believed that language proficiency influences their confidence in carrying out tasks correlated to giving instruction when teaching grammar and vocabulary given the context. Having pointed out challenges that teachers have faced, the current study also asked about teachers' need of language proficiency development contributed to self-efficacy, which brings further suggestions for educators who design training programme. Teachers in current study argued that language proficiency is a basic element for being a quality English teacher, therefore it should be developed continually. Besides, teachers also require for training course through which they can acquire skills of giving instruction in English, as well as knowledge of English culture.

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