

The Relationship between English-as-a-foreign Language Teacher Proficiency and Language Use in the Classroom

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Brazil, much like the rest of the South American countries, belongs to what Kachru (1992) calls the Expanding Circle, consisting of countries in which English does not have an institutional or official role; therefore, there are no local models of English (McKay, 2002). However, in South America, English is the most valued foreign language. In fact, it is the most commonly taught foreign language in public and private schools. As explained by Rajagopalan and Rajagopalan (2005), the number of people studying English in Brazil grows at a rapid pace on an annual basis. Much like in the rest of South America, knowing English will give these people access to better job opportunities; therefore, for them, English is “an asset” (a term used by JESUS, MELLO, and DUTRA, 2007).

While Braine (2005) refers to China as the “new ELT powerhouse” (p. xvii), it is only fair to refer to Brazil as the “ELT powerhouse in Latin America.” Besides the fact that the Brazilian economy is now considered to be one of the major ones in the world, two forthcoming events, the 2014 Soccer World Cup and the 2016 Olympic games, will greatly contribute to enhancing the status of Brazil around the world; therefore, contributing to the growing demand for English language speakers in Brazil (and in other South American countries) and, in turn, the increasing need for English language teachers. However, it is a reality that while many teachers (throughout the Southern Cone) have received professional preparation and perceive themselves to be proficient to teach English, many others enter the profession having completed only four or five years of EFL studies; therefore, they see themselves as being unprepared, linguistically and professionally, to face the demands of the EFL classroom. These self-perceptions are important to consider since they may ultimately affect the teachers’ instructional practices (e.g., BUTLER, 2004; LIU et. al, 2004; RICHARDS and LOCKHART, 1994).

In this article, I summarize major findings of research that investigated the relationship among teachers’ English language proficiency (perceived and real), teachers’ professional preparation, and their instructional practices. I also discuss implications for EFL teaching and in-service training, with a specific focus on South America.

The Relationship between Self-Perceptions about Teacher Language Proficiency and Instructional Practices

A question that has only recently begun to be investigated in relation to non-native English-speaking (NNES) professionals working in EFL settings is how the EFL teachers’ perceptions about their proficiency in English and their beliefs about teaching

and learning affect their decisions about which language to use in the classroom. This line of research has shown that some EFL teachers have concerns about their proficiency in English. Specifically, in one study, Li (1998) found that South Korean teachers of EFL attributed, at least in part, their difficulty to implement communicative language teaching (CLT) to their low English language proficiency, low strategic and sociolinguistic competence in English, and lack of pre-service or in-service training in CLT. In a related study, focusing on EFL teachers in South Korea, Taiwan, and Japan, Butler (2004) found that the EFL teachers she investigated reported having gaps in their English proficiency, their desired level of proficiency, and what they perceived to be the minimum level of proficiency necessary to teach at the elementary school level. As explained by Butler, the teachers' negative self-perceptions are problematic because they may ultimately affect their instructional practices and, in turn, negatively affect student learning and motivation.

In addition to teachers' self-perceptions, research on EFL teachers has shown that their use (or non use) of the target language (TL) in the classroom can also be attributed to their perceptions about their students' low level of English language proficiency. For example, in an investigation of South Korean teachers' Liu, Ahn, Baek, and Han (2005) found that teachers used Korean for the purposes of explaining vocabulary and grammar, providing background information on a topic, saving time, emphasizing important information, and managing classroom behavior. Like Liu et. al, Li (1998) found that South Korean teachers believe that their difficulties in implementing CLT arise from their students' low proficiency in English, their limited motivation for communicative competence, and their resistance to class participation.

Research on teachers' self-perceptions has also investigated teacher accentedness in relation to teacher identity and instructional practices. This line of research has shown that NNES teachers in Europe associate native speaker accent with positive characteristics whereas they associate a nonnative speaker accent with negative characteristics (JENKINS, 2005). According to Jenkins, a variety of factors, including teachers' past experiences and their perceptions about their future, may contribute to their identification with native speakers or to their desire to be identified as a native speaker as expressed by native-like accentedness. Jenkins concludes that "it can't be taken for granted that teachers (let alone all speakers) from the expanding circle wish unequivocally to use their accented English to express their L1 identity or membership in an international (ELF) community" (p. 541).

Two studies that have relevance to the issue of NNES teacher accentedness come from the ESL setting. In the first study, focusing on ESL students' attitudes toward teacher accentedness, Kelch and Santana-Williamson (2002) found that ESL students were not capable of distinguishing between an native English-speaking and an NNES teacher accent "with a high degree of accuracy" (p. 62) and that they attributed positive characteristics to teachers who were *perceived* to be native speakers. In Kelch and Santana-Williamson's study, the students' perceptions about the teachers were attributed to their degree of familiarity with the different varieties of English spoken by the teachers—confirming earlier research by Smith (1992) and Munro & Derwing (1997) that shows that familiarity with an accent increases its intelligibility. In the second study, focusing on ESL students' perceptions about NNES teachers' foreign accent, Kim (2008) found that ESL students perceived speakers to be difficult to understand when they

perceived the speakers to have a foreign accent. However, teacher accentedness was not correlated with teacher intelligibility and interpretability. In other words, most of the ESL students who participated in the study were able to transcribe the stimuli they were given with over 80% of accuracy regardless of the degree of the speakers' accentedness. These studies have implications for EFL teaching since they show that teacher accentedness does not necessarily reduce intelligibility. Additionally, the study by Kim also shows that students' negative attitudes toward NNES teachers are not the result of reduced intelligibility or interpretability. While these two studies paint a somewhat negative picture of ESL students' attitudes toward teachers with a foreign accent, their findings need to be considered in light of other studies which paint a different picture. Specifically, Liang (2002) and Mahboob (2004) showed that ESL students do not perceive native speakers to be ideal teachers of English. Taken together, both studies suggest that being a native speaker of English is not a central factor in how teachers are evaluated: teachers' instructional practices, language proficiency, and personal factors affect the students' attitudes (positively or negatively) toward the teachers.

The studies I summarized above show that the literature has focused on teachers' *perceptions* about their language proficiency. Overall, these studies show that in EFL contexts, teachers have concerns about their language proficiency and that, based on self-reported data, there seems to be a relationship between self-perceptions and instructional practices. Working with Mahboob (KAMHI-STEIN and MAHBOOB, 2005), I investigated the relationship between *actual* English language proficiency and English language use in the class. I also looked at the role, if any, that EFL teachers' beliefs played in their use (or non-use) of English in the classroom. To answer these questions, I investigated selected classrooms in Buenos Aires, Argentina, a city in which the status of English is similar to the status that English has in large Brazilian cities. In the section below, I summarize the overall results of this study.

The Relationship between EFL Teacher Actual Language Proficiency and Language Use in the Classroom

In my research in Buenos Aires, Argentina, I investigated 7 EFL teachers working in public school classrooms by implementing a triangulated approach (Kamhi-Stein & Mahboob, 2005). This approach involved administering language proficiency tests (the Quick Placement Test, two writing tasks—an essay and a summary); interviewing the teachers about their beliefs about teaching and learning; administering a teachers' beliefs inventory; and conducting classroom observations. The results of the study showed that 4 of the 7 teachers I investigated believed that only English should be used in the language classroom, 2 believed that both Spanish and English have a place in the language class, and 1 believed that Spanish should be used only if there is an absolute need for it. The results of the classroom observations I did of these teachers were consistent with what they said in the interviews. Specifically, 4 used only English in their classes, 2 used mostly English, and only 1 used Spanish almost exclusively—in this last case the teacher contradicted what she said in the interview). In a correlational analysis, I found that the higher the teachers' actual proficiency in English—as measured by the Quick Placement Test (University of Cambridge, n.d.) and the summarization task, the more English they

actually used in the classroom. At the same time, the stronger the teachers' beliefs about the importance of using English in the classroom, the more they actually used it in the classroom. In summary, the results of this study showed that for the teachers I investigated, their TL proficiency was an important contributor to their use of the English language in the class. The second important factor that affected the language they used in the classroom was their beliefs about teaching and learning.

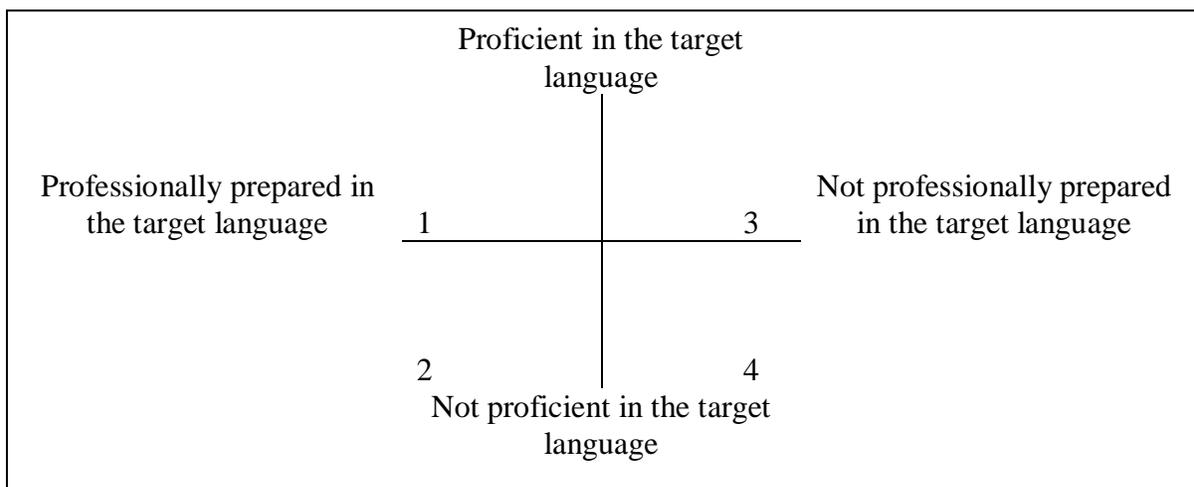
Conclusion and Implications

Taken together, the literature shows that teacher language proficiency—perceived or real—plays an important role in teachers' use or non-use of English in the FL classroom. Additionally, the literature also shows that teachers' beliefs about teaching and learning are important because they affect their instructional practices (e.g., BUTLER, 2004; LIU et. al, 2004; RICHARDS and LOCKHART, 1994). In Buenos Aires, I observed that in general, the teachers' instructional practices were affected by their actual language proficiency and their beliefs about teaching and learning. In turn, it can be argued that the teachers' beliefs in Buenos Aires reflect those of the educational system in which the teachers are immersed. Specifically, in Buenos Aires, language teacher education emphasizes CLT and, as such, gives importance to the use of the TL in the classroom. Therefore, it was not surprising to see that most of the Argentine teachers in this study believe that English plays a central role in the classroom.

An important point that needs to be made in relation to the research is the following: While the literature shows that TL proficiency—perceived or real—is of high relevance in language teaching, teacher preparation is another important factor that needs to be considered (PASTERNAK and BAILEY, 2004). Pasternak and Bailey argue that teachers' language proficiency “is only one element of professionalism” (p. 161). For them, the second element of professionalism is professional preparation. They further argue that teachers, regardless of whether they are native or nonnative speakers—must have both declarative knowledge—“knowledge *about* something”—and procedural knowledge—“ability to do things” in at least three key areas: “(1) knowing about and how to use the target language, (2) knowing about and how to teach in culturally appropriate ways, and (3) knowing about and how to behave appropriately in the target culture” (p. 158). Pasternak and Bailey (2004) present a framework that looks at issues of language proficiency and professional preparation. Central to their framework are two notions. First, language proficiency and professional development need to be perceived as continua. Second, “there are different degrees of proficiency: being proficient is a continuum, rather than an either-or proposition” (PASTERNAK and BAILEY, 2004, p. 163). Moreover, “whether or not a teacher is proficient depends on how we define this multifaceted construct” (p. 163). Figure 1 below presents the framework.

As explained by Pasternak and Bailey (2004), Quadrant 1 reflects those teachers who are both proficient in the TL and professionally prepared. Quadrant 4 reflects those teachers who are not proficient or professionally prepared. Quadrant 2 reflects teachers who are professionally prepared but are not proficient in the TL and Quadrant 3 reflects teachers who are proficient in the TL but are not professionally prepared.

Figure 1. Continua of Target Language Proficiency and Professional Preparation



Source: Pasternak, M., & Bailey, K. M., 2004, p. 161.

In the introduction of this article, I argued that in South America, the market demand for EFL teachers is growing year after year. This demand sometimes leads employers to hire teachers who are neither English proficient nor professionally prepared. This would be the case of teachers falling in Quadrant 4 in Pasternak and Bailey's framework. These teachers may have studied English at a private school or at an EFL institute—where instruction is typically given twice or three times a week for a minimum of two contact hours per week and a maximum of 6 contact hours per week¹. If these teachers are put in the position of having to teach a language they are not comfortable using and are not professionally prepared to teach, then they should be given opportunities to participate in in-service programs designed to help them enhance their proficiency in English and their instructional practices. The goal of such programs would be dual. First, they would be designed to help teachers improve their procedural knowledge of English (a point made by Pasternak and Bailey) so that they develop the confidence they may lack to use English in the classroom. This kind of training could be given both by native English speaking (NES) and NNES professionals working in collaboration. NES professionals could provide models (rather than norms) of language use (see DALTON and SEIDLHOFER, 2004 for a discussion on this topic) and NNES professionals could provide teachers with a first-hand understanding of how they can use their NNES status as a resource rather than a problem. The second goal of in-service programs would be to help teachers enhance their classroom management skills. This kind of training would focus on how to manage classroom behavior, how to use a variety of instructional strategies, deciding on the type of pedagogy that is relevant to the local students' needs, etc. In-service teacher training could also involve providing teachers with mentoring opportunities in which teachers identify areas of concern to them (linguistic and professional), work with their mentor to address these concerns, and engage in a process of reflection that promotes teacher awareness about their growth.

The need for English language teachers in Brazil (and in other South American) will only grow exponentially in the coming years. Therefore, it is not unrealistic to assume that many EFL teachers will enter the market without the English language proficiency and the professional preparation necessary to teach EFL. Given the research I have presented in this article, supporting the notion that teachers' instructional practices are affected by their TL proficiency and their beliefs about teaching and learning, then it is possible to argue that employers must support these teachers in their quest for professional training if these teachers are expected to do more than simply "survive" in the EFL classroom.

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The study described in this article was funded by TIRF, The International Research Foundation for English Language Education.

Notes

1. This observation is made based on my knowledge about the EFL market in South America. It is understood that there may be situations that are different from the example I am providing.

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Abstract

This article summarizes major findings of a study that investigated the relationship among EFL teachers' language proficiency (perceived and real), teachers' professional preparation, and their instructional practices. Results of the study showed that target language proficiency was an important factor contributing to the EFL teachers' use (or non-use) of the English language in the classroom. The second important contributing factor to the use or non-use of English in the classroom was the teachers' beliefs about the role that English should play in the foreign language classroom. The article discusses the findings in the South American context and concludes with implications for the professional preparation of EFL teachers with limited training and English language proficiency.

Keywords: teacher language proficiency, self-perceptions, non-native English-speaking professionals, teacher accentedness, language use in the classroom.

Resumo:

Este artigo apresenta resultados de uma investigação sobre as relações entre a proficiência em inglês (real e percebida) de professores de inglês como língua estrangeira (ILE), a preparação profissional destes professores e suas práticas pedagógicas. O estudo mostra que a proficiência na língua meta é um fator importante que contribui para o uso (ou não-uso) da língua inglesa na sala de aula. Outro fator que também contribui para o uso ou não da língua inglesa consiste nas crenças de professores quanto ao papel do inglês na sala de aula de língua estrangeira. Os resultados são discutidos no âmbito do contexto da América do Sul e o artigo conclui com as implicações à preparação profissional de professores de ILE com proficiência e treinamento limitados em língua inglesa.

Palavras-chave: proficiência do professor, auto-percepção, profissionais não-nativos de língua inglesa, sotaque do professor, uso de língua na sala de aula.