



**EFL TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
ENGLISH PROFICIENCY: CURRENT PRACTICES  
AT A CENTER OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES IN VIETNAM**

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**Abstract:**

Teachers with a high level of target language proficiency are believed to be more self-efficacious and more competent to provide good models of language usage and to undertake various teaching tasks in the target language effectively. Having a good command of English is a necessary qualification for successful teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL). In the Vietnamese teaching and learning context, EFL teachers are required to have proper professional qualifications, and English proficiency is an important quality for teaching effectiveness. With the aim to examine teachers' perceptions towards English proficiency, this descriptive study was conducted with 33 EFL teachers at a center of foreign languages through an online survey. The results showed that teachers recognized the necessity of having English qualifications and had positive perceptions towards the English proficiency requirements. The study is beneficial for both teachers and educational administrators to have an insight into the importance of language proficiency for teaching quality. Important recommendations for successful proficiency development were also discussed.

**Keywords:** proficiency, competence, EFL teachers, quality, standardized tests

**1. Introduction**

In response to the growing need for English popularity, particularly in EFL contexts, various countries including Vietnam have introduced a number of education policies to improve teaching quality (Le & Le, 2022). English language proficiency has become an issue of debate for the past decade in Vietnam when the Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) required all English language teachers to reach an English level proficiency of level 4 or B2 on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) for primary and lower secondary school teachers and level 5 (CEFR C1) for upper secondary, high school teachers and tertiary teachers (Ly & Le, 2022).

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Teachers of English at centers of foreign languages are also required to meet the English standards of level 5 or equivalent. It is widely recognized that proficiency in English is a critical quality of successful EFL teachers (Nugroho, 2018). Teachers' level of English proficiency is significantly proportional to the students' learning outcomes (Goodwin, 2018). Students generally respect their teachers as good model in the process of learning the target language. Teachers with good English proficiency generally are more self-efficacious and more competent in their classroom instructions (Le & [Renandya](#), 2017; Rachmawati & Purwati, 2021). A study of teachers' perceptions of their target language proficiency is greatly significant as the findings can provide practical implications for both teachers and teacher educators to make appropriate adjustments to enhance the quality of online teaching. The importance of teachers' English proficiency has been extensively examined in university contexts; however, few studies have so far been undertaken in the context of teaching EFL in foreign language centers in Vietnam. It is important to analyze the perceived levels of English proficiency that teachers think are essential for teaching effectiveness. This study, therefore, aims to examine EFL teachers' perceptions towards their English proficiency level at a center of foreign languages in the South of Vietnam.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1 Language proficiency

In the general context, language proficiency refers to a person's ability to use the language fluently and accurately; that is, they can communicate, using the language in speech and writing without difficulty. In the related review of literature about EFL teaching and learning, the term of proficiency can be used interchangeably with English competency (Masduki et al., 2022). In this manner, determining teachers' English proficiency involves assessing their ability to use the four basic skills including listening, reading, speaking and writing in the language. In a specific classroom, teachers' proficiency includes instructing, providing feedback, asking questions, and presenting the teaching materials effectively through the use of the target language (Kasumi, 2015). According to Richards (2017), there are five performance indicators, commonly used to determine teachers' language proficiency including accuracy, fluency, complexity, appropriacy and capacity. Accuracy refers to the ability to use the language correctly in terms of pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar. Fluency refers to the extent to which a person can smoothly and effectively communicate on a wide range of topics both in speaking and writing in the target language. Complexity refers to teachers' ability to use complex language, especially in vocabulary and grammar. Appropriacy is about whether the language we use is relevant and appropriate for the purpose, audience and context of the situation. Finally, capacity in the classroom environment refers to the extent to which a teacher is able to make full use of their target language proficiency to explain, give examples, select relevant teaching materials, model correct language use and provide effective feedback on student performance. Although there are various ways to conceptualize proficiency,

it is recognized that teachers with a high level of English proficiency will have a more successful implementation of English-medium instruction in the classroom (Wang, 2021).

## 2.2 Level of proficiency

For effective teaching, it is required that English language teachers need a certain level of proficiency (Vu, 2017); however, for the past decades, teachers, educational educators and policymakers have debated about what type and what level of proficiency is needed for effective teaching (Renandya, 2018). In Thailand, teachers are expected to reach the B2 level of CEFR (Franz & Teo, 2018). In Hong Kong, teachers' proficiency is assessed based on a specifically designed local test such as TOEFL (Coniam et al., 2017). In Indonesia, common standardised tests to measure English proficiency for qualification and instructional quality are TOEFL and TOEIC (Wulyani et al., 2019). In Vietnam, since 2008 according to the decision of the Ministry of Education and Training (Pham, 2018), English teachers have been mainly assessed based on the Vietnamese version of CEFR or so-called CEFR\_V and are expected to have level 4 (B2) or 5 (C1). Currently, most universities have accepted several types of test certificates of English proficiency as presented in Table 1.

**Table 1:** Common types of proficiency test certificates

CEFR	CEFR_V	IELTS	TOEIC	TOEFL ITP	TOEFL iBT
B2	Level 4	5.5-6.5	600-845	500-589	46-93
C1	Level 5	7.0-7.5	850-940	590-649	94-109

## 2.3 Measurement

While standardized academic language proficiency test scores are often used to measure teachers' level of proficiency (Irdiyansyah & Rizki, 2018), teachers can measure their own proficiency through self-reported evaluation or self-assessment. Self-assessments are relatively effective and less time-consuming and more importantly, it is accepted that self-assessment of the general level of English can be a strong predictor of performance on the official English proficiency tests (Fan & Yan, 2017). An examination of teachers' perception is focused on in the current study as this can provide teachers with opportunities to self-reflect and avail opportunities through which they can increase language efficiency.

## 2.4 CFL and its policies for proficiency development

The Center of Foreign Languages, Can Tho University (hereafter referred to as the Center) was established in 1991, under the management of Can Tho University and has been providing courses in English, French, Chinese, Korean and Vietnamese to the community for over 30 years. The Center is committed to optimizing opportunities to develop teachers' professional knowledge and skills including proficiency. The standard level of proficiency is a compulsory condition for teacher recruitment and promotion, and teachers need to update their proficiency certification every five years. Annual

teaching evaluation is based on two main criteria: observed classroom practices and qualifications including proficiency certification. The Center regularly organizes professional development activities such as organizing training courses, workshops, and establishing teachers' community to share teaching experiences. For the past five years, the Center also supported teachers to prepare and take proficiency tests by fully refunding the exam fees if the teacher test-taker can reach the required proficiency standard.

### **3. Material and Methods**

#### **3.1 Research design**

In the current study, a descriptive survey design with an online questionnaire was employed with a group of EFL teachers at a center of foreign languages in Vietnam. Teachers' perception survey is feasible and efficient as the data of a large sample can be promptly collected and analysed.

#### **3.2 Instrument**

Teachers' perceptions of the necessity of language proficiency were assessed by an online survey which was developed by the research team, consisting of 3 main sections. The first section requested personal information. The second section consisted of closed-ended questions in three parts: the first part asked the participants to indicate the level of influence of proficiency on their teaching effectiveness, using a five-point Likert-scale ranging from 0 (not influence at all) to 4 (much influence); the second part asked teachers to indicate the required level of proficiency from level 3 to level 5 according to the CEFR\_V; and the third part asked teachers to self-evaluate their currently perceived proficiency on the five levels of poor, fair, satisfactory, very good and excellent. In the third section, the respondents were asked to provide free responses to the two open-ended questions asking about typical challenges of achieving the required level of proficiency and suggestions for the Center to help teachers to meet the proficiency standards.

#### **3.3 Participants**

Participants of the study were EFL teachers at a center of foreign languages in the South of Vietnam. All the teachers were invited via personal e-mail to participate in an online questionnaire. In response, 33 out of 56 participants (58.9%) completed the survey. The basic characteristics of the participants are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2:** Demographics details of participants (N = 33)

Characteristics	Number	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		
Female	25	75.8%
Male	8	24.2%
<b>Experience of teaching</b>		
1-2years	4	12.1%
3-5years	8	24.2%
More than 5 years	21	63.7%
<b>Proficiency tests (taken in the past 5 years)</b>		
IELTS	6	18.2%
TOEIC	8	24.2%
VSTEP	20	60.6%

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Results of closed-ended questions

The results have been organized into the three main characteristics of an effective English language teacher. Generally, the mean scores are relatively high with a total average mean score of 3.52. The statement related to Organization and communication skills "Prepare the lesson well" had the highest score of 3.88, and the statement "Provide constant feedback" in the section on Pedagogical knowledge had the lowest mean score of 3.18.

#### 4.1.1 Perceived influence of English proficiency on teaching effectiveness

The teacher participants were asked to indicate their perceived influence of English proficiency on their teaching effectiveness on a scale from 0 (not influence at all) to 4 (much influence). It is worth noting that all the teacher participants perceived the importance of English proficiency at different levels. As presented in Table 3, over half of the respondents (51.5%) reported a very high level of influence of English proficiency on their teaching performance. Additionally, 33.3% of the participants indicated a relatively high level of influence and about 15.2% at the middle level.

**Table 3:** Descriptive results of the influence of English proficiency on teaching (N = 33)

Level of influence	Number	Percentage
0	-	-
1	-	-
2	5	15.2%
3	11	33.3%
4	17	51.5%

#### 4.1.2 Required level of English proficiency in your experience

As presented in Table 4, most of the teachers in this study perceived the necessity of having a certain level of English proficiency in their teaching. Most of the participants

(84.8%) accepted the level 5 or equivalent as a requirement of English standard of an EFL teacher at the Center. It is also important to note that five of the respondents (15.2%) perceived level 4 as a sufficient condition for an EFL teacher. It is possible that these teacher participants were from primary schools and were relatively confident in classroom instruction at this proficiency level. However, this explanation needs further investigation.

**Table 4:** Descriptive results of the required level of English proficiency (N = 33)

Level of proficiency	Number	Percentage
Level 3 (B1 or equivalent)	-	-
Level 4 (B2 or equivalent)	5	15.2%
Level 5 (C1 or equivalent)	28	84.8%

### 4.1.3 Teachers' self-measure of level of English proficiency on accuracy, fluency, complexity, appropriacy, capacity

In their self-measurement of English proficiency on the five performance indicators of accuracy, fluency, complexity, appropriacy, and capacity, the participants generally reported their proficiency at a satisfactory and very good level (See Table 5). It is also important to note that there was one teacher (3%) reported their performance of complexity at a poor level. Similarly, another teacher reported this low level of appropriacy. The reason can be that complexity and appropriacy are two perceived difficult abilities to master, especially in oral communication (Suzuki & Kormos, 2019).

**Table 5:** Descriptive results of English proficiency self-measurement (N = 33)

Indicators	Poor	Fair	Satisfactory	Very good	Excellent
Accuracy		2 6.1%	11 33.3%	18 54.5%	2 6.1%
Fluency		2 6.1%	13 39.3%	15 45.5%	3 9.1%
Complexity	1 3%	3 9.1%	14 42.4%	13 39.4%	2 6.1%
Appropriacy	1 3%	2 6.1%	9 27.3%	18 54.5%	3 9.1%
Capacity		4 12.1%	10 30.3%	15 45.5%	4 12.1%

## 4.2 Results of open-ended questions

Besides the close-ended questions in the survey, the participants were also invited to present the typical challenges to achieve the required level of English proficiency and provide suggestions for the Center to improve their performance.

### 4.2.1 Typical challenges

Most of the participants indicated major obstacles to their obtaining the required certificate of proficiency. Their perceived challenges were classified into four main

themes including time constraints, limited ability, low motivation and high exam fees. Due to busy teaching and work schedule, many teachers hardly managed their time for proficiency exam preparation or professional development activities. Some typical answers were as follows.

*"We are very busy at work and with family. We need more time to prepare for the test, I think within this year."*

*"Since I have to work and do research, I don't have much time left for test review."*

*"In my case, it takes me a lot of time to teach and take MA course at the same time, so I don't have enough time to concentrate on achieving English proficiency with a good result as I expect."*

Limited ability in English to prepare for a high-stakes test is also a concern for several teacher participants. It is possible that some teachers are capable of teaching, especially at the basic level, but are not confident and ready for an important examination for their professional appointment. In this study, listening and reading are two challenging examination skills, perceived by the respondents. Their answers were as follows.

*"My listening skill is not good and I am afraid that I may lose my prestige of teaching if the result is not satisfactory."*

*"Two biggest challenges are listening and reading tests. They are multiple choice questions but I hardly get the high scores for these."*

*"I am relatively confident to teach, using both English and Vietnamese in my classroom, but to be honest, I am not fluent in conversations with native speakers."*

Low motivation is another challenge for several teachers who delayed taking the proficiency exams. Some teacher participants mentioned their reluctance for the exam due to exam anxiety and low intrinsic motivation. These responses were relatively in line with existing literature about some common problems of test-takers when preparing for high-stakes examinations (Ilhan et al., 2021).

*"The requirement of proficiency is too demanding and I am not ready for the test. I am really discouraged."*

*"The test is so stressful and I am not very motivated to take the test."*

*"I am not highly motivated as I am too busy for my teaching."*

Standardized tests generally are very costly, and most test-takers reported test fees as one of the challenges for their exam preparation. Some of their complaints were as follows.

*"The test fee of IELTS is as much as my monthly teaching salary. I think I can have only one chance to take the test."*

*"The exam questions are challenging and the test fees are too costly."*

*"I need to prepare for the exam very carefully because the test fees are expensive."*

#### **4.2.2 Suggestions**

In the last part of the survey, the participants were invited to suggest specific activities that the Center can do to help them improve their English proficiency. Their answers focused on the three main groups of activities: organizing training courses, providing materials for self-study and supporting examination fees.

Most of the participants expected the Center to organize exam preparation courses. Also, they suggested having appropriate activities to enhance their English proficiency such as English clubs or professional developing sharing sessions. Learning community is also recommended activity for teachers' proficiency improvement. Teachers would like to participate in these activities so that they can both improve their language proficiency and share teaching experiences.

*"The Center should provide English examination courses in either VSTEP or IELTS at weekend afternoons so that most teachers can participate in."*

*"The teachers' community is a useful network for teachers to share our teaching experiences and a good environment to improve our proficiency. We love to have regular meeting sessions with English-native speakers."*

Many respondents also suggested receiving more self-study materials for examination preparation. Online materials were commonly more applicable as indicated by most teachers, perhaps due to their availability and affordability.

*"The Center can recommend more official resources, especially on the Internet so that we can practice and prepare for the tests more effectively."*

*"I need more practice in my self-study. The Center should provide teachers with more test materials."*



A practical suggestion indicated by several participants was financial support including exam fees. This support was greatly important for some teachers, as their monthly teaching salary is not enough to cover the exam fee.

*"The test fee is not affordable. The Center's policy to refund the exam expense is really significant."*

*"The Center can provide more financial support for teachers with long-term contracts. We are loyal teachers and we deserve to have more benefits from the Center."*

## **5. Recommendations**

Current practices at the Center were practical but not sufficient. Teachers' professional development should be regular and mandatory. An effective staff development program should establish and follow well-established standards to guide the design, evaluation, and funding of the program. To be effective, teachers' professional development requires thoughtful planning followed by careful implementation with feedback to ensure it responds to the staff's developmental needs. Specifically, it is important to recognize that proficiency development takes time and commitment, and institutional managers must be willing to ensure that teachers should have both the time and financial support they need to participate in their own learning. Both teachers and the Center management should share responsibilities and commitment to guarantee the success of the program.

### **5.1 For teachers**

Teachers should be engaged in active and continuous learning to enhance their proficiency performance. Identifying the level and the needed skills is an important step in any language proficiency development program. In addition, teachers should maintain or upgrade their English proficiency by participating in English preparation courses or joining various professional development practices to support English proficiency such as attending seminars, workshops, and conferences on teaching skills. Many daily activities can be of use for enhancing English proficiency including watching English movies, listening to songs and reading news in English. Attending English-speaking clubs or joining a language exchange network such as Tandem can be interesting and practical to improve English in the most natural way.

### **5.2 For Center's administrators**

The commitment to a professional development program should effectively start at the top. The Center management should serve as the motivating factor by keeping a persistent focus on continuous teachers' proficiency improvement. The administrators should clearly communicate their policies and implementation plans for proficiency development programs to individual teachers. For programs to be successful, they must be planned, designed and implemented with the active cooperation of teachers.

It is of great importance for the Center managers to provide teachers with adequate resources for both teaching and assessment. To be well-prepared for high-stake exams, teachers should be familiar with the exam structure and practice with comprehensive materials.

Assessment and the evaluation of teachers are necessary and valuable in improving educational quality; however, standardized tests are not the only effective method. Professional development should be flexible, and administrators should appropriately update expectations and requirements. The Center management is expected to encourage teachers to continuous learning from teaching and from professional development activities. The Center should cherish a learning culture and have appropriate reward policies for positive contributions.

The administrators should provide sufficient financial support to increase opportunities for professional learning. Teaching grants and performance rewards can be practical assistance to develop teachers' proficiency and enhance their teaching quality.

## **6. Conclusion**

English language proficiency is an essential quality for EFL teachers at different levels of education in Vietnam, particularly in the era of regional and global integration. In this study, EFL teachers' perceptions of English proficiency were examined. The results revealed that teachers generally recognized the importance of standard proficiency for their teaching quality, although several typical challenges need to be addressed and resolved. This study could provide a valuable reference for both teachers and educational administrators so that appropriate professional development policies and implementation plans can be effectively conducted for improved teaching quality.

## **Conflict of Interest Statement**

The author declares no conflicts of interest

## **About the Author**

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