The Relationship between Teachers’ English Proficiency and Curriculum Delivery in EFL Settings and Settings where English is an Institutionalized Language

**Priority addressed:** Teachers’ Proficiency and effective English instruction

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**Countries where the research was conducted:** Argentina, South Korea, and Pakistan
Executive Summary

Over the last several years, there has been a growing interest in issues related to nonnative English-speaking (NNES) professionals. Much of this interest has resulted in publications focusing on their advantages and disadvantages as NNES professionals (Amin, 2001; Braine, 1999; Medgyes, 1994); their perceptions about their status in the TESOL field (Thomas, 1999); their self-perceived language needs (Tang, 1997); and their TESOL teacher preparation (Brutt-Griffler & Samimy, 1999; Kamhi-Stein, 1999; Pasternak & Bailey, 2004). However, missing from the literature was an understanding of the relationship between teacher target language (TTL) proficiency and language used in the classroom. This study, conducted with funding from a TIRF, was designed to investigate the relationship between TTL proficiency, beliefs about language use in the classroom, and the actual language used in the classroom by NNES teachers in selected schools in Argentina, Pakistan, and South Korea.

The investigation was conducted in selected classrooms in public middle schools and high schools in the cities of Buenos Aires (Argentina), Pusan (South Korea), and Karachi (Pakistan). Specifically, seven teachers, teaching in three different schools, participated in the study in Buenos Aires. The neighborhoods in which the schools were located were socially integrated; therefore, the students attending the schools reflected a wide range of socio-economic strata. Another seven teachers participated in the study in Pusan, where the neighborhoods were quite homogeneous, with most of the children being middle class. Six teachers participated in the study in Pakistan, where the neighborhoods represented different socio-economic strata. The age of the students in the three countries ranged from 13 to 17. Six of the seven teachers in Argentina had graduated from local language teacher preparation programs, and the remaining teacher had a translation degree from a national university. While the seven South Korean teachers had graduated from language teacher preparation programs in South Korea, three of them had Master’s degrees in English education from local universities. Finally, one Pakistani teacher had a teaching degree, one had a BA in education and another one had an MA in education. The remaining three Pakistani teachers had degrees outside the teaching field.

Data for the study were collected using a variety of instruments designed to allow the triangulation of the findings. These instruments included surveys designed to provide information on the teachers’ background and beliefs about teaching and learning, a battery of tests designed to provide information on TTL proficiency, and videotaped of the teachers’ classrooms.

The results of the study showed quantitative and qualitative differences among the teachers in the three countries. Following is a summary of the results.

1. **Regarding actual TTL proficiency and teachers’ perceptions about English language proficiency**: Argentine teachers exhibited upper intermediate to advanced levels of proficiency in English, the South Korean teachers’ proficiency in English ranged from lower to upper intermediate, and the Pakistani teachers’ proficiency in English ranged from elementary to advanced. The Argentine teachers perceived their overall English language skills to be very good; the South Korean teachers perceived their overall language skills to be fair, good or very good; and the Pakistani teachers perceived themselves to be fair, good, very good, or excellent.

2. **Regarding teacher beliefs about language use in the classroom and TL use in the classroom**: While the study results showed differences among the teachers in each of the
three countries, it was possible to identify patterns of beliefs among teachers within each country. For example, 4 Argentine teachers believed that only the target language should be used in the language classroom, two believed that both the first language (L1) and the TL should be used, and one believed that Spanish should be used only if needed. The classroom observations showed that the language used in the classroom was, in general, consistent with the teachers’ stated beliefs. Most teachers used English to a large extent, with only one teacher—the one without a teaching degree and with the lowest level of proficiency in English--resorting to the use of Spanish for most classroom instruction purposes. All of the South Korean teachers stated that they believed that both Korean and English should be used in language classrooms. The observations of South Korean classrooms showed that while 4 of the participating teachers code-switched from Korean to English, the remaining 3 teachers used mostly Korean in the classroom. Finally, while 5 of the Pakistani teachers reported that they believed that both a local language and the TL should be used in the language classroom, the classroom observations showed that the teachers’ language use ranged from only English in the classroom to mostly Urdu.

3. **Regarding the relationship among TTL proficiency, teacher beliefs about language use in the classroom, and actual language used in the classroom:** The statistical analysis showed that the higher the teachers’ proficiency in English, the more English they used in the classroom. At the same time, the stronger the teachers’ beliefs about the use of English in the classroom, the more they used it in the classroom.

Taken together, the results of this study show that in the classrooms investigated, the extent to which the teachers used the TL or the L1 was a function of TTL proficiency and teacher beliefs about the use of the L1 in the classroom. However, teacher beliefs played a smaller role than TTL proficiency. This result suggests that TTL proficiency alone cannot be used to explain why teachers use (or don’t use) the TL in the classroom. In this respect, the study showed that teachers’ beliefs about what language to use in the classroom, as well as the actual language used in the classroom, to a large extent, reflected the beliefs and practices of the teacher education programs in which the teachers had received their professional preparation. For example, this was the case of Argentine teachers whose local teacher preparation programs emphasized the importance of only using the TL in the classroom. This was also the case of South Korean teachers, who indicated that the teacher education programs in which they had studied emphasized the importance of using both the L1 and the TL in the classroom.

Another finding of the study was that the relationship between the teachers’ self-perceptions about TL proficiency and language used in the classroom was weaker than the relationship between the teachers’ actual TL proficiency and language use in the classroom. This result suggests that teachers’ perceptions of their language ability are not necessarily an accurate and reliable measure of proficiency. This finding suggests that self-reported data on teacher language proficiency should, if possible, be avoided, or if this is the only source of information regarding teacher language proficiency, should be taken with great caution.

In summary, while the study showed that there is a relationship between teacher language proficiency and language used in the classroom, teacher beliefs about teaching and learning create a complex relationship between TTL proficiency and the language used by teachers in the classroom. At the same time, this investigation has suggests that teachers’ beliefs about the use
of the TL or the L1 cannot be explained without making reference to the linguistic and social practices in the setting in which the teachers function.
References