What level of proficiency do teachers need to teach English in different settings? Perceptions of Novice Teachers in Canada

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Abstract

Teachers' English proficiency is a significant qualification for successful teaching of English. However, the issue of what level of proficiency teachers believe they need for different settings has not received much attention. This study investigates this issue by looking at novice Chinese pre-service teachers (N = 113) in an MA TESOL program in Ontario, Canada. Data are drawn from surveys and reflective writing pieces to investigate teachers' self-perceived English proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), the minimum level of proficiency these teachers believe is required to teach across different settings based on students' level of proficiency, student age, and context (e.g., EFL vs ESL), and finally, how their own self-perceived proficiency compares with these minimum levels. Results show teachers perceive their proficiency around the B2 – C1 level. Looking at the minimum level required for various settings, teachers perceived ESL contexts to require higher levels. However, for many of the settings, teachers' self-perceived proficiency appeared inadequate, suggesting these teachers did not feel their general proficiency was suitable. The results are discussed along with implications for language teacher education programs.

Keywords: *Teacher language proficiency, Language Teacher Education (LTE), NNEST*

English language proficiency is a fundamental competency for English language teachers (Farrell & Richards, 2007). Regardless of the context, English language teachers require some level of English proficiency to teach English effectively. While the 'if you can speak it, you can teach it' mentality is rightly criticized in English language teaching (ELT) (e.g., Eslami & Harper, 2018; Freeman, 2017; Phillipson, 1992; Richards, 2017), and the field now recognizes the importance of other aspects of teacher knowledge and skill, language proficiency remains a main criterion for teacher expertise. This has led to discussions about how teachers' English language proficiency should be assessed (e.g., Freeman, 2017), and the impact this focus on proficiency can have on teachers' perceptions of their professional competence (Kamhi-Stein, 2009), especially for non-native English-speaking teachers (NNESTs). NNESTs'[1] confidence in their language abilities is at times adversely affected because of unjust comparisons with native English-speaking teachers (NESTs). The native speaker fallacy (Phillipson, 1992) and the wider notion of native speakerism (Holliday, 2005) are both terms that have been used to highlight the pervasive ideology that persists in English language teaching which unduly places NESTs, and the English they speak, as the ideal for the ELT classroom. Thus, while NNESTs may have appropriate levels of language proficiency, their confidence in their own language capabilities and self-perceptions of their proficiency may be negatively affected by this prevalent native-speakerist discourse that continues throughout ELT.

Teachers' perceptions of their own language proficiency are crucial because they serve as the basis of their confidence (Eslami & Harper, 2018; Kamhi-Stein, 2009). The field of (language) teacher self-efficacy has provided ample evidence to support the notion that teachers' beliefs about their capabilities significantly impact teachers' motivations, behaviour, and potentially even their students (Tschannen-Moran, Woolfolk Hoy, & Hoy, 1998; Wyatt, 2018). Speaking about the power of self-belief, Bandura (1995) argues that "people's level of motivation, affective states, and actions are based more on what they believe than on what is objectively the case" (p. 2). This has been applied to perceived language proficiency and many studies have broadly noted the impact of teachers' perceptions of their proficiency and how it impacts them in their professional lives (e.g., Hiver, 2013; Lee, 2004).

However, there are different ways teachers can view their own proficiency. As discussed, when NNESTs compare their proficiency with NESTs, this can cause undue feelings of anxiety as they assess their proficiency against native speakerist norms. More recent arguments suggest teachers should consider their language capabilities in relation to specific teaching tasks required of them, emphasizing a classroom proficiency or 'English-for-teaching' (Freeman, Katz, Gomez & Burns, 2015; Richards, 2017). Another avenue of research has been to explore teachers' perceptions of their proficiency in comparison with the minimum levels of proficiency they believe are needed to teach in certain settings (e.g., Butler, 2004). Initial studies show that when teachers consider their general language proficiency capabilities in relation to specific teaching contexts, they often feel their proficiency is inadequate (e.g., Butler, 2004; Lee, 2009). However, this area of research remains underexplored (Richards, 2017), as studies have only investigated teachers' perceptions to teach in EFL contexts.

Drawing on a mixed methods methodology, this study investigates the perceptions of novice Chinese English language teachers completing a MA TESOL program in Ontario, Canada. Using surveys and reflective writing assignments, this study sought to determine how teachers

self-perceive their own language proficiency based on the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001), their perceptions of the minimum levels of proficiency required to teach across different settings based on student proficiency, student age, and context (e.g., EFL vs ESL), and finally how their own self-assessed proficiency compares with these minimum levels.

Literature Review

Proficiency is a "concept which can be viewed from different angles" (Harsch, 2017, p. 252), making it a difficult construct to define and/or measure. This complexity is evident in various frameworks proposed to define and measure language proficiency. Previous conceptualizations have looked at proficiency from a sociolinguistic approach and described proficiency in terms of what people could do with language (e.g., Bachman, 1990; Canale & Swain, 1981); other authors differentiated between academic language proficiency and everyday language used for communication (e.g., Cummins, 1979), while more recent conceptualizations push for proficiency theorizations that move away from native speakerist norms and emphasize proficiency as dynamic and multiple (e.g., Mahboob, 2018). Other approaches have also been proposed depending on one's theoretical stance (e.g., Hulstijn, 2015).

With so many ways to conceptualize proficiency, researchers and policy makers have debated about what type, and what level, of proficiency is needed for teachers to succeed in the classroom. For example, in Vietnam, teachers are assessed based on the CEFR and are expected to have a B2 or C1 level (Nhung, 2018). In Thailand, teachers are also assessed using the CEFR with teachers expected to reach the B2 level (Franz & Teo, 2018). In Hong Kong, teachers' proficiency is assessed based on a specifically designed local test (Coniam, Falvey & Xiao, 2017). However, while broad standards are set by policy makers, many teachers struggle to meet these designated levels of proficiency, negatively impacting their professional confidence (Franz & Teo, 2018; Nhung, 2018). Partially because of this, some researchers now argue against the use of general proficiency measures as standards for English language teachers as they are often based on native speaker norms and place NNESTs at an unfair deficit (Franz & Teo, 2018; Freeman, 2017; Richards, 2017). This has spawned discussions about English-for-teaching, a form of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) that refers to the specific language required by teachers to perform classroom tasks (Freeman et al., 2015). Especially for EFL teachers with low and intermediate students, some have argued that it is not necessary for teachers to have high levels of general proficiency and that these teachers should focus on this more specific type of English proficiency that serves their immediate classroom needs (e.g., Freeman, 2017; Richards, 2017).

These discussions also extend to how teachers perceive their own proficiency, with serious implications for teachers' professional confidence. At times, NNESTs note lower confidence in their oral language capabilities and language fluency (Arva & Medgyes, 2000). Conversely, many NNESTs often note grammatical language competence as an area of strength when discussing their linguistic capabilities (Medgyes, 1999; Moussu, 2018). However, these strengths and limitations are often noted in comparison with NESTs, and while comparisons are perhaps inevitable (Eslami & Harper, 2018), these can lead to overly simplistic dichotomous thinking as NNESTs self-assess themselves in comparison with NESTs (Selvi,

2014). In formal research studies, one common trend is for NNESTs to self-assess their general proficiency with a focus on 'can do' statements investigating what they believe they can do with language (e.g., Butler, 2004; Chacon, 2005; Choi & Lee, 2016). Using these measures, studies often show that teachers self-perceive their receptive capabilities higher than their productive capabilities (Butler, 2004; Lee, 2009). While self-assessments of proficiency can lack accuracy and should never be used for high stakes placements (Trofimovich, Isaacs, Kennedy, Saito & Crowther, 2014), teacher self-assessments can still serve as a valuable developmental tool (Borg & Edmett, 2018), and self-assessed proficiency is often related to teachers' self-efficacy (Faez, Karas, & Uchihara, 2019). A meta-analysis of the relationship between general proficiency and language teacher self-efficacy found an overall relationship of $r = .37$, but there was some variation depending on the measures used (Faez et al., 2019). While most studies use general proficiency measures (Faez & Karas, 2017), initial research has shown that when teachers consider their language capabilities in relation to their specific teaching duties (i.e., English-for-teaching), this positively impacts teachers' self-efficacy more compared to general proficiency measures (Karas, 2019).

Similar variations in confidence can be found when teachers self-assess their proficiency in relation to different teaching contexts. For example, Brinton (2004) investigated international NNESTs on their practicum in the United States and found many teachers struggled in the ESL context. While teachers felt comfortable in their respective home EFL contexts and the program endeavoured to place teachers in classes with lower level students, teachers continued to have doubts about their linguistic capabilities. Similarly, Samimy and Brutt-Griffler (1999) found that the NNESTs in their study felt their proficiency hindered them at times and that the ESL context was more of a professional challenge compared to EFL contexts. In a study methodologically similar to this one, Butler (2004) compared the self-assessed proficiency of teachers in Korea, Taiwan and Japan and the minimum level they believed was necessary to teach in their respective contexts. The results found that for all three contexts, teachers' self-assessed proficiency was lower than the minimum level required, indicating teachers felt their proficiency was inadequate. Lee (2009) found similar results for the Korean elementary English language teachers in her study. The teachers acknowledged that to teach elementary children in Korea, a high level of proficiency was not required, but they still felt their proficiency capabilities were below the required level. Conversely, Choi and Lee (2016) noted that the Korean middle and high school teachers in their study on average felt their own proficiency was slightly higher than the minimum required levels. Focusing on Western-trained Chinese English language teachers, a participant group similar to the participants in this study, Hong and Pawan (2014) noted teachers felt their English had improved during their study abroad experience, which empowered teachers when they returned to China to teach. These studies all highlight the importance of teachers' self-perceived proficiency in relation to different teaching settings and its impact on teachers' confidence. This study expands on this area of research, but with a focus on novice Chinese English language teachers from an EFL context who were about to finish their MA TESOL program in Ontario, Canada, a predominantly ESL context.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed methods design to answer the following research questions:

1. What are novice NNESTs' self-perceived levels of proficiency based on the CEFR?

2. What do novice NNESTs believe are the required minimum proficiency levels to teach across different settings based on students' level of proficiency (beginner, intermediate, advanced), student age (children, youth, adult), and context (EFL vs ESL)? What are the effects from these variables?

3. Does a gap exist between teachers' self-perceived proficiency and the minimum levels required to teach across different settings?

The study context was a Master of TESOL program in a mid-size English-speaking city in Ontario, Canada. Participants were invited to take part in the study by the first author during one of their courses. They were presented with consent forms and information about the study and all students agreed to participate. The MA program is course-based and predominantly caters to international students seeking a graduate level TESOL degree. In total, the program takes approximately 10 months to complete over 3 semesters. The study context was selected partially because of convenience, but the program is similar to other MA TESOL programs (see Stapleton & Shao, 2018) as it offers a variety of courses but no teaching practice component. While no two contexts are the same, comparisons can be made with other MA TESOL programs with large groups of international teacher candidates, especially those with teacher candidates from China. There were 125 initial participants for this study spread over two different cohorts over two years. Five participants were removed due to incomplete surveys, and a further 7 were removed due to outlier scores, leaving the final number at $N = 113$. The vast majority of participants were female ($n = 103$). All of the participants were originally from China and most had only been in Canada for the duration of the MA program which was approximately 9 months at the time of data collection. To gain entry to the program, all of the teachers had a minimum overall IELTS score of 6.5/9 with no individual score below 6. The range of experience for teachers was small; most teachers had no teaching experience at all, but a select few had taught English as private tutors or teaching assistants. No teachers had more than 6 months of teaching experience.

Data were collected in two phases. First, participants were asked to self-report their own language proficiency using different scales drawn from the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001). To assess teachers' language skills, the CEFR Common Reference Levels: Self-Assessment Grid was used (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 26). The self-assessment grid allows users to appraise their own proficiency across five skills: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production and writing. It includes six levels: Basic user (A1, A2), independent user (B1, B2), and proficient user (C1, C2) with descriptors for each level (Council of Europe, 2001). To assess teachers' self-perceived vocabulary ability, the Vocabulary Range and Vocabulary Control scales (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 112) were combined into one scale and used in this study. The Grammatical Accuracy (p. 114) scale was adapted to assess teachers' perceptions of their grammar knowledge while the Phonological Control (p. 117) scale was adapted to measure teachers' perceptions of their pronunciation. Thus, a total of eight scales were used to measure teachers' self-assessed proficiency. All scales ranged from A1 to C2, but similar to Butler (2004), teachers were allowed to place themselves between levels if they felt this was more accurate. All of the scales for this study were slightly

adapted to make them more suitable to English language teachers, but the main content of the items remained the same. All items used 'I can' statements to ensure clarity that teachers were self-assessing their own proficiency.

After self-assessing their own proficiency, participants were asked to give their perceptions of the minimum level of proficiency, based on the CEFR, needed to teach across various settings. The settings provided were based on combinations of three factors: 1) student proficiency (beginner, intermediate, advanced), 2) student age (children [age 5 – 12], youth [age 13 – 17], adults [18+]), and context (EFL or ESL). Each combination was presented to participants to form 18 combinations in total. For example, participants were asked to assess what level of proficiency a teacher would need to teach general English to beginner level children (age 5 – 12) in an EFL context; then, they were asked the minimum level of proficiency a teacher would need to teach general English to beginner level children (age 5 – 12) in an ESL context, and so on. This amounted to 18 settings with every possible combination. For the EFL contexts, participants were instructed that the students all spoke the same L1 and that the teacher could use the L1 as a resource in the classroom. Similar to their own self-reported proficiency levels, participants were allowed to select between CEFR levels if they felt this was the best option.

After completing the proficiency survey, the first cohort of participants were instructed to write a two-page reflection paper discussing their own proficiency, the relationship between language proficiency and pedagogical capability, and how teachers' language proficiency impacts teachers' abilities to teach in various settings, both at a general level and also in relation to themselves personally. This resulted in 41 reflection papers from all teachers in the first cohort of participants. The second cohort did not write reflection papers due to curriculum changes. The above-mentioned topics served as guides for the participants when writing their reflections, but the intention of the reflective assignment was for teachers to write openly and freely with few encumbrances. This produced a more diverse data set, but at times with different foci from participants. The written reflections are used as supplementary data to research questions 2 and 3.

The reflections were analyzed thematically based on criteria outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). The thematic analysis took a researcher-driven approach, meaning our focus was analytically driven, allowing us to focus on the data as it related to our specific research questions. In such an approach, the researchers take an active role in deciphering themes, as opposed to letting themes emerge from the data, as in other thematic analyses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This allowed us to focus on participants' discussions on students' proficiency, age, and context, which coincided with the quantitative data focus, and extract relevant themes and quotations related to these variables. This study places greater emphasis on the quantitative survey data and adopts an explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). In such a design, the quantitative data is gathered first, and serves as the main data source for the study. Following the collection of the quantitative data, the qualitative data is collected in order to fill in the gaps and provide deeper insights into the problem being researched.

Findings

Self-perceived proficiency

The first research question sought to discover the teachers' self-perceived general English proficiency according to the 8 CEFR scales. Each CEFR level was given a numerical value (e.g., A1 = 1, A2 = 2, B1 = 3, B2 = 4, C1 = 5, C2 = 6) and if participants selected between levels, this was given a half point value (e.g., B1 – B2 = 3.5; B2 – C1 = 4.5 etc.). The mean score across the 8 measures was 4.49 (*SD* = 0.51), indicating these teachers' overall self-perceived proficiency was approximately between B2 and C1. Table 1 shows the individual skill/domain scores for these participants. The highest score was found for reading (4.85) while the lowest was found for grammar (4.30). For the most part, teachers self-assessed their language skills/capabilities between the B2 and C1 levels, with their self-assessed reading approaching C1. To assess if there were any significant differences across teachers' self-perceived language capabilities, a repeated measures ANOVA was conducted along with pairwise comparisons using the Bonferroni correction. The Mauchly test indicated violation of sphericity, thus the Greenhouse-Geisser statistic was utilized (Warner, 2013). There were significant differences when looking across the 8 language skills and domains (F[5.23, 585.63] = 12.67, p <.001, η_p^2 = .10). Pairwise comparisons showed significant differences between teachers' self-perceived reading capabilities and all of the skills/domains with the exception of pronunciation. Teachers' self-perceived grammar capability was significantly lower when compared with the other two domains of vocabulary and pronunciation. Finally, teachers' self-perceived pronunciation ability was significantly higher when compared with the two speaking measures (spoken production and spoken interaction). There were no other significant differences across the pairwise comparisons.

Table 1. Teachers' self-assessed proficiency.

Language Skill/Domain	Mean (Standard Deviation)	95% CI
Listening	4.48 (0.73)	4.35/4.62
Reading	4.85 (0.68)	4.72/4.98
Spoken Interaction	4.39 (0.75)	4.25/4.53
Spoken Production	4.34 (0.69)	4.21/4.46
Writing	4.54 (0.67)	4.42/4.66
Vocabulary	4.40 (0.62)	4.28/4.51
Grammar	4.30 (0.71)	4.17/4.43
Pronunciation	4.60 (0.82)	4.44/4.75
Overall	**4.49 (0.51)**	**4.39/4.58**

Minimum Level of Proficiency Required for Teaching English in Different Settings

To assess teachers' perceptions of the minimum levels of proficiency teachers need to teach across a variety of settings, participants evaluated 18 different settings. These were based on students' proficiency level, student age, and finally the context (EFL vs ESL). For each setting, teachers wrote in the minimum level, based on the CEFR, they believed was required to successfully teach in that setting. Table 2 provides the mean score for each of the 18 settings. Teachers indicated the minimum levels required to teach in ESL contexts were slightly higher than the EFL contexts. The lowest minimum level was for beginner children in an EFL context (2.77) which was around the A2 – B1 level. The highest level was for advanced adult learners in an ESL context (5.87) which was approaching the C2 level. For 4 settings in the EFL context, participants identified the minimum required level as below the B2 level (all Beginner settings and Intermediate Children), 3 settings at or around the B2 level (Intermediate Youth, Intermediate Adult, and Advanced Children) and finally 2 contexts where teachers believed the C1 to C2 levels were required (Advanced Youth and Advanced Adult). Perceived required levels for the ESL context were generally higher with only 1 setting rated below the B2 level (Beginner Children). Four settings were rated at or slightly above the B2 level (Beginner Youth, Beginner Adult, Intermediate Children, Intermediate Youth) while 4 settings were rated at above the C1 level as the minimum requirement (Intermediate Adults and all Advanced settings).

Table 2. Minimum Required Proficiency Levels Across Settings and Comparison between EFL and ESL.

Setting	Mean (SD)	95% CI	Mean (SD)	95%CI	Cohen's d
	EFL		ESL		
Beginner Children	2.77 (0.89)	2.61 – 2.94	3.61 (0.97)	3.43 – 3.80	1.15
Beginner Youth	3.56 (0.88)	3.40 – 3.73	4.21 (0.89)	4.05 – 4.38	0.94
Beginner Adults	3.96 (0.96)	3.78 – 4.14	4.44 (0.95)	4.26 – 4.62	0.88
Intermediate Children	3.88 (0.82)	3.72 – 4.03	4.42 (0.79)	4.27 – 4.57	0.95
Intermediate Youth	4.38 (0.68)	4.25 – 4.51	4.87 (0.66)	4.74 – 5.00	1.00
Intermediate Adults	4.75 (0.74)	4.61 – 4.89	5.17 (0.70)	5.04 – 5.30	0.85
Advanced Children	4.54 (0.85)	4.38 – 4.70	5.02 (0.75)	4.88 – 5.16	0.98
Advanced Youth	5.15 (0.62)	5.04 – 5.27	5.56 (0.52)	5.47 – 5.66	0.89
Advanced Adults	5.62 (0.45)	5.54 – 5.71	5.87 (0.31)	5.81 – 5.93	0.67
Total	**4.29 (0.59)**	**4.18 – 4.40**	**4.80 (0.56)**	**4.69 – 4.90**	**0.86**

*Note*s. Each setting scored on scale from 1 – 6 (A1 = 1; A2 = 2; B1 = 3; B2 = 4; C1 = 5; C2 = 6). All comparisons between EFL and ESL contexts are statistically significant.

To investigate the impact of the three variables on teachers' perceptions, a 3 x 3 x 2 repeated measures ANOVA was utilized. The levels for each variable were: Student proficiency (beginner, intermediate, advanced), student age (children [5 – 12], youth [13 – 17], adults [18+]), and context (EFL vs ESL). Sphericity was violated so the more conservative Greenhouse-Geisser statistic results are presented (Warner, 2013). The main effects were all significant: Student proficiency (F[1.59, 175.69] = 445.40, p <.001, η_p^2 = .80), student age (F[1.44, 160.91] = 251.07, p <.001, η_p^2 = .69), and context (F[1, 112] = 228.12, p <.001, η_p^2 = .67). Analyzing the main effects, student proficiency had the biggest impact on teachers' perceived required minimum levels across settings, followed by student age and then context, but all effects are large (Norouzian & Plonsky, 2018). The two-way interactions were also significant: Student proficiency and student age (F[3.12, 348.96] = 3.80, p = .01, η_p^2 = .03), student proficiency and context (F[1.86, 208.40] = 20.02, p <.001, η_p^2 = .15), and student age and context (F[1.84, 206.06] = 25.70, p <.001, η_p^2 = .19). For the two-way interactions, the interactions with context both showed higher effect sizes. Finally, the three-way interaction between student proficiency, student age, and context was also significant: F[3.78, 423.12] = 3.08, p = .02, η_p^2 = .03). Post-hoc analysis was conducted to compare the effect of context between the EFL and ESL contexts. This analysis was pre-planned based on previous studies that have shown NNESTs feel less confident in ESL settings (e.g., Brinton, 2004; Samimy & Brutt-Griffler, 1999). Also, as shown in Table 2, participating NNESTs felt all ESL settings required a higher level of proficiency. Furthermore, while the main effects showed proficiency as the largest effect, the two-way interaction effects with context were highest, indicating a strong impact from context. Using the Bonferroni correction, when comparing the two contexts and holding student proficiency and age constant, a significant difference was found between all 9 comparisons. Cohen's d was calculated for each pairwise comparison (See Table 2). The largest effect size from context was found for beginner children (d = 1.15), while the smallest effect size was for advanced adults (d = 0.67). With the exception of the advanced adults comparison, all of the effect sizes approach or exceed 1 standard deviation indicating a medium effect (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014) from context. Figure 1 shows the EFL/ESL comparison across all 9 comparisons.
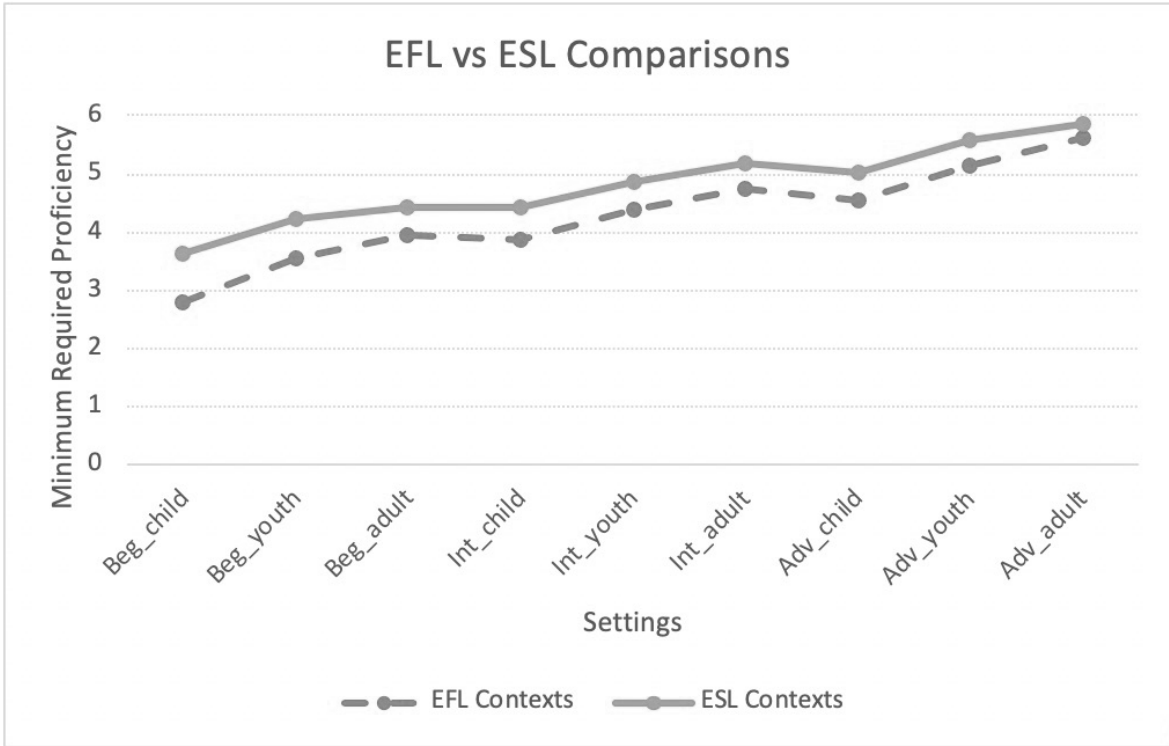
Figure 1. EFL vs ESL Comparisons.

Teachers' Self-Perceived Proficiency Compared with Minimum Levels

In order to compare teachers' self-perceived overall proficiency ($M = 4.49$, $SD = 0.51$) with each of the 18 settings, paired t-tests were utilized. To account for the numerous analyses, the Bonferroni correction was used as a more conservative alpha level. The traditional significance level of .05 was divided by 18 for an alpha level of .003. Thus, to be considered statistically significant, the comparisons needed to be below this level. For the EFL context, 4 comparisons showed that teachers' self-perceived general proficiency was significantly higher than the minimum required for those settings (Beginner Children, Beginner Youth, Beginner Adult, and Intermediate Children); 2 comparisons were non-significant (1 non-significantly higher [Intermediate Youth] and 1 non-significantly lower [Advanced Children]), and in 3 settings, teachers' self-perceived proficiency was significantly lower than the minimum required (Intermediate Adults, Advanced Youth and Advanced Adults) (See Table 3 for full results).

In order to move beyond mere null hypothesis testing (Plonsky, 2015), Cohen's d was calculated by using the average of the two standard deviations and taking into account their correlations. For the EFL settings, the effect sizes were mostly in the small to medium range, with the exception of Beginner Children ($d = 1.74$) and Advanced Adults ($d = 1.76$) which were large (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). Looking at the Beginner levels, teachers' perceived proficiency was higher for all levels, but the effect of age is evident as the effect size decreases as the students get older, with Beginner Youth ($d = 0.95$) and Beginner Adults ($d = 0.50$) both as generally small (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). For the Intermediate level, there is less of a range in effect size, but again the impact of age is evident. Teachers' perceived proficiency was higher

for Intermediate Children, albeit at a small effect (d = 0.64), while there was a very small effect for Intermediate Youth (d = 0.13). For Intermediate Adults, teachers felt their proficiency was below the required minimum level, but again the effect was small (d = 0.30). Finally, for the Advanced levels in EFL contexts, there was virtually no difference in teachers' perceived proficiency and the minimum required level for Advanced Children (d = 0.06), a small negative difference for Advanced Youth (d = 0.88) and a large negative difference for Advanced Adults (d = 1.76). Thus, for the Advanced levels, teachers' perceived proficiency was not suitable for the Advanced Youth and Advanced Adults settings, but teachers' perceived proficiency was potentially suitable for teaching Advanced Children in EFL contexts.

Looking at the ESL contexts, teachers' self-perceived proficiency was only significantly higher for 1 comparison (Beginner Children); 3 comparisons were slightly higher, but non-significant (Beginner Youth, Beginner Adult, and Intermediate Children); and 5 comparisons showed that teachers' self-perceived proficiency was significantly lower than the minimum required levels (Intermediate Youth, Intermediate Adults, and all Advanced levels). Looking at effect sizes, for the Beginner levels, all of the effects were small (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). While teachers' perceived proficiency was higher for all of the settings, the perceived difference was minimal, especially for Beginner Youth (d = 0.28) and Beginner Adults (d = 0.05). For the Intermediate levels, there was little difference for the Intermediate Children level (d = 0.08), while the Intermediate Youth (d = 0.49) and Intermediate Adults (d = 0.84) showed a slight negative difference, but still at the small level (Plonsky & Oswald, 2014). Finally, for the Advanced levels, teachers' perceived proficiency was lower than the minimum required level for Advanced Children, but only with a small effect (d = 0.65). However, the difference for the Advanced Youth (d = 1.61) and Advanced Adults (d = 2.50) were both large, indicating a large perceived gap.

Comparing the EFL and ESL contexts, the effect sizes show differences across the two contexts. For the Beginner levels, in both EFL and ESL contexts, teachers' perceived proficiency was higher than the required minimum levels, but the effect sizes are smaller for the ESL contexts, indicating a smaller positive gap showing teachers' perceived proficiency was only slightly higher in ESL compared to EFL contexts. For the Intermediate levels, teachers' perceived proficiency was higher for the Intermediate Children setting, but the effect was larger for the EFL context compared to the ESL context indicating that context again was impactful. Intermediate Youth and Intermediate Adult settings in ESL contexts both showed a negative gap between teachers' perceived proficiency and the minimum required level, again with larger effect sizes indicating that context was impactful. Finally, the Advanced levels in the ESL contexts showed higher effect sizes compared with the EFL contexts, indicating that while teachers' perceived proficiency was deemed lower than the minimum required levels for all of the Advanced settings, this difference was more pronounced in the ESL contexts. Overall, as shown in Table 3, across the 18 settings, teachers' self-perceived mean proficiency was significantly higher than 5 of the minimum levels, significantly lower than 8 of the settings' minimum levels, and showed no significant difference for 5 of the settings' minimum levels. While participants felt their proficiency level was adequate for teaching in 6 EFL contexts, they felt they possessed adequate proficiency for only 4 ESL settings.

Table 3. Participant Mean Self-Perceived Proficiency (4.49) Compared with Minimum Levels Across Settings.

Setting	Mean Difference	Cohen's d	Mean Difference	Cohen's d
	EFL		ESL	
Beginner Children	*1.71	1.74	*0.88	0.84
Beginner Youth	*0.92	0.95	0.27	0.28
Beginner Adults	*0.53	0.50	0.53	0.05
Intermediate Children	*0.61	0.64	0.07	0.08
Intermediate Youth	0.11	0.13	*-0.38	0.49
Intermediate Adults	*-0.26	0.30	*-0.68	0.84
Advanced Children	-0.05	0.06	*-0.53	0.65
Advanced Youth	*-1.08	0.88	*-1.08	1.61
Advanced Adults	*-1.14	1.76	*-1.39	2.50

Notes. * = Self-perceived proficiency statistically higher/lower than minimum required at *p* <.003. Each setting compared with mean overall proficiency of 4.49 (A1 = 1; A2 = 2; B1 = 3; B2 = 4; C1 = 5; C2 = 6).

Written reflections

The written reflections from the first cohort of students served as supplementary data for research questions 2 and 3. After completing the surveys, the first cohort of students completed a reflective assignment that discussed their own proficiency, the relationship between proficiency and teaching ability and finally how English teachers' proficiency may impact teachers' competence to teach in different classroom settings. Discussing the variables used in this study (student proficiency, student age and context) and how they may impact the minimum level of required teacher proficiency for these settings, the participants overwhelmingly discussed the EFL vs ESL dichotomy as the most impactful. Student proficiency was also discussed, but to a lesser extent. Age was not mentioned in students' written reflections when discussing the minimum required levels in a general sense. Teachers who discussed the issue of context all placed greater difficulty on the ESL context: "In an ESL context, like Canada, a good command of spoken English is crucial because it is the primary means of communication considering that students are highly unlikely to share the same first language" (Participant 14). The perceived difficulty in ESL contexts was often related to the inability to use students' L1 in the class: "Concerning the ESL/EFL contexts, I think the ESL [context] requires higher language proficiency since the L1 is not applicable as in the EFL context. (Participant 41). "When teaching in an EFL context, teachers will feel less pressure as their mother tongue could be used more frequently in the classroom" (Participant 7). Some even connected this to nativeness, arguing non-native teachers would struggle in ESL contexts: "most students in ESL class have difficulties to get used to a non-native English teacher's accent" (Participant 24)[2]. "In ESL context, only native-speakers are probably qualified to teach

English" (Participant 5). After emphasizing the perceived difficulties of ESL contexts compared to EFL contexts, some participants briefly mentioned student proficiency as well. For example, one teacher remarked "Teachers with low language level are not qualified to teach advanced students, or even teach in ESL contexts" (Participant 6). One participant mentioned it in relative terms, arguing that teachers simply needed to have greater proficiency than their students: "I personally do not expect a teacher with the same proficiency level as mine to [be able to] effectively teach me even if he or she is pedagogically capable…I prefer him or her to be at least slightly more advanced" (Participant 1). Another remarked: "The adequacy of teachers' language proficiency depends on the target students, who they are and their level of language proficiency. The requirement for teachers' language proficiency for beginners should not be the same as for advanced learners" (Participant 26). However, these comments were much less common compared to discussions about the ESL/EFL contexts, and to reiterate, student age was not discussed at length in any of the written reflections when considering required proficiency in a general sense.

While participants discussed the above variables in general terms, they also reflected on their own proficiency and their capabilities to teach across different settings. Again, the ESL/EFL contexts were the most noted element when discussing themselves personally: "My lack of confidence originates from the teaching context I currently live in, the ESL context, which restricts me to using English in the classroom" (Participant 7). Other participants also discussed the ESL/EFL contexts, but also mentioned the age of students and the subject matter: "[In EFL contexts] I am confident to teach high school students no matter vocabulary or grammar, listening or speaking. However, in an ESL context, I am nervous due to the lack of confidence" (Participant 13). Another stated: "I cannot teach higher students because of my limited language level for explaining some complicated concepts and lack of cross-cultural awareness. In terms of an EFL class, I can give a lecture to intermediate level students by using L1 when it is necessary" (Participant 24). The use of L1 was a common aspect mentioned by many as it served as a crutch for these teachers: "My relatively lower level of proficiency makes it impossible for me to use English freely in my classes, not to mention teaching without using my L1" (Participant 33). Overall, while teachers mentioned students' proficiency level and age somewhat, when considering their own capabilities, the common thread throughout the written reflections focused on teachers' anxiety about teaching in ESL contexts which would restrict them from using their L1 in the classroom.

Discussion

This study investigated novice Chinese English language teachers' perceptions of their own language proficiency, the minimum levels they believe are needed to teach across different settings, and in which settings their own self-perceived proficiency is sufficient to teach. Looking at teachers' self-assessed proficiency, according to the CEFR, participants' overall proficiency was between the B2 and C1 levels. For the individual skills/competencies, their self-perceived reading capabilities were significantly higher than the other language skills/competencies except pronunciation. This is in line with past research where teachers self-assessed their receptive capabilities higher than their productive language capabilities (e.g., Butler, 2004; Lee, 2009). However, participants self-reported their lowest competency to be grammar which contradicts previous claims about NNESTs' high level of confidence with their

(pedagogical) grammar knowledge (e.g., Moussu, 2018). To enter the MA program, participants had a minimum overall IELTS of 6.5, which according to the IELTS website, is on the threshold of the B2/C1 level (https://www.ielts.org/ielts-for-organisations/common-european-framework). This comparison suggests teachers' assessment of their proficiency is somewhat accurate, as their reported proficiency is very close to the minimum levels required to enter the program, but perhaps slightly conservative as their mean score placed them in the middle between B2 and C1 and not approaching C1. However, no objective measures of proficiency were taken at the time of the survey and such comparisons using the numerical values assigned for each level do not allow for further nuanced interpretation. Beyond the accuracy of the self-appraisals, they served as a valuable developmental exercise allowing the participants to consider their own language capabilities while becoming familiar with the CEFR scales.

Assessing the minimum required level of general proficiency across 18 different settings, the effect sizes for all 3 variables (student proficiency, age, context) were large, and while student proficiency was the largest effect, the difference between the 3 effect sizes was minimal, indicating all 3 variables impacted teachers' perceptions of the minimum required level of proficiency to teach in different settings. However, the two-way interactions highlighted the importance of context as both two-way interactions involving the context variable were substantially larger than the interaction with only student proficiency and student age. Planned post-hoc contrasts between the EFL and ESL contexts showed significant differences across all pairings. Across the different pairings, teachers felt that to teach in ESL contexts, they needed to be on average about half a CEFR level (0.51), and at times close to a full level, higher compared to teaching in EFL contexts. One possible reason for these results is that in ESL contexts, , teachers are more likely to teach a heterogeneous student body that may not share a common L1. The impact of native speakerism must also be noted. In ESL contexts, teachers are surrounded by native speaker varieties of English and may feel inferior to their NEST colleagues. These teachers from China travelled to Canada to study TESOL and enhance their English by living in an English-speaking environment, but comparisons with the local inner circle variety of English can be detrimental and negatively impact NNEST self-efficacy (Eslami & Harper, 2018). While some argue NNESTs should not compare themselves with NESTs (Selvi, 2014), for these teachers who are studying in a Canadian university, comparisons may be inevitable as they compare themselves with speakers around them. Thus, despite having students at the same level and even the same age, participants felt to teach in the ESL context required significantly higher levels of proficiency compared to EFL contexts.

The written reflections also showed the impact of context on teachers' perceptions. While there was some brief acknowledgement of the importance of student proficiency in relation to how much proficiency a teacher may need, the overwhelming theme throughout the written reflective data was on teachers' discomfort with teaching in ESL contexts. This was interesting as the prompts provided to the participants asked them to discuss their own language capabilities, the relationship between language proficiency and teaching capabilities, and finally how teachers' proficiency may impact teachers' competence to teach in different classroom settings. There was no explicit mention of the ESL/EFL dichotomy, but this proved to be the dominant theme throughout the written reflections. It is plausible that immersion in the ESL context of Ontario may have raised their proficiency and academic capabilities, but at

the same time, contributed to feelings of anxiety as they may have felt that with so many proficient speakers of English around, teachers of English must have higher levels of general proficiency in the ESL settings.

Finally, when comparing the minimum required levels across the 18 settings with the average overall self-perceived proficiency score of the participants, the teachers' self-perceived proficiency was significantly lower than many of the settings. Looking at the EFL settings, teachers did not feel they had the required proficiency to teach advanced level youth or adults or intermediate adults. However, they did perceive their own proficiency as significantly higher than the required levels for all of the beginner level settings and the intermediate children setting, and with two non-significant comparisons, these results indicated their self-perceived proficiency was sufficient for 6 of the 9 EFL settings. While it is encouraging that they felt their proficiency was sufficient to teach in many of the EFL settings, they still felt they did not have sufficient proficiency to teach advanced level learners even in an EFL context where they can use their L1 to support their teaching. Switching to the ESL contexts, teachers' self-perceived proficiency was significantly higher than required levels for only one of the settings and significantly lower than the required level for 6 of the 9 settings. These teachers felt their proficiency was adequate for teaching in only 4 of 9 ESL settings. It is not known where these teachers will teach, but these results suggest that these teachers do not feel their general proficiency is sufficient to teach in many of the ESL contexts assessed in this study. These results are largely in line with Butler (2004) and Lee (2009) who conducted similar analyses and found teachers' self-perceived proficiency to be significantly lower than the required minimum for their contexts, but counter to Choi and Lee (2016) who found opposite results. However, these studies only investigated EFL contexts and we are unaware of any other studies that conduct similar analysis in ESL contexts. The results from this study magnify the lack of confidence some NNESTs feel when considering their language capabilities in ESL contexts (e.g., Brinton, 2004), even with lower level students.

Implications and Conclusion

These findings raise many questions for LTE programs, especially those with international teacher candidates. It is important for LTE programs to consider where their international candidates will teach. This is not often explicitly highlighted in MA TESOL program descriptions. In their survey of MA TESOL programs, Stapleton and Shao (2018) note that on average, MA TESOL programs require an overall IELTS of 7, with no programs going below an overall average of 6. These participants all started the program with a minimum overall IELTS of 6.5, and it appears after close to 10 months of full-time study, the MA program and live abroad experience were not enough to raise their language confidence to teach in many ESL contexts. The participants in this study were all from China, but it is not known where they will pursue their teaching careers. Previous research has questioned the capability of western-based TESOL programs to adequately prepare teachers for EFL contexts (e.g. Selvi & Peercy, 2016) and meet the needs of East Asian teacher candidates (e.g., Stapleton & Shao, 2018), but these studies did not focus on teacher proficiency. The results from this study suggest that if these teachers choose to teach in Ontario, Canada, a predominantly ESL context, they may lack the confidence in their language abilities to teach even in some intermediate level classrooms. LTE programs need to carefully consider their minimum proficiency requirements

and also be more explicit about the different proficiency requirement for different contexts. The assumption that international teacher candidates will return to their EFL contexts may be true for some teachers, but for others, they may remain in the ESL context and these teachers need to be assured that there are still many settings in ESL contexts where they can teach.

Next, LTE programs also need to be more explicit about how much teachers' proficiency can improve by living and studying in an English-speaking environment. While some studies have shown that teachers do feel their proficiency improves from these types of study-abroad experiences (e.g., Faez & Karas, 2019), as the findings of this study show, this experience alone is not necessarily sufficient to allow teachers to feel confident for teaching in various settings, especially in ESL contexts. This may be partially due to unrealistic expectations about how much their language will improve when living abroad. For many MA TESOL programs in English-speaking countries, language development is often an assumed result, but simply living in an English-speaking environment does not guarantee linguistic development. Rather, it is the language experiences that non-native speakers have that matter most in order to enhance language learning (Ranta & Meckelborg, 2013).

Finally, it is important to direct teachers' attention to consider their proficiency in terms of their actual needs (i.e., English-for-teaching). The results of this study suggest that it may be more beneficial for teachers to consider their language capabilities in relation to specific teaching tasks required of them. This notion of English-for-teaching (Freeman et al., 2015) is slowly emerging in English language teaching in order to move away from general proficiency measures that are based on native speakerist norms (Freeman, 2017). While this concept is still new to the field, initial studies have shown that when teachers consider their language capabilities in relation to the specific tasks required of them, as opposed to ambiguous general notions, their confidence to teach can be greatly enhanced (Karas, 2019; Nhung, 2018). LTE programs, especially those with a higher number of international teacher candidates, may need to provide some form of language development component as part of the curriculum. Such language development components can include both native and non-native teachers (see Yerian, Mikhaylova, Pashby & Kato, 2019) and allow teachers to enhance their proficiency as they learn to teach and consider their proficiency in relation to the vast array of ELT contexts that exist in both EFL and ESL locales. This type of component could allow prospective teachers to develop greater confidence in their language teaching.

Notes

[1] We are aware of problems associated with the term non-native English speaking teachers (NNEST) and the native/non-native dichotomy (see Faez, 2011a, 2011b) but because of the broad use of the term in literature we use it for purposes of this study. [back]

[2] The quotes are verbatim and may include linguistic errors. [back]

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