

Qualities of A Primary English Teacher – What Insights Has Research Offered?

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Abstract:

Background: As English Education is being increasingly implemented in primary schools worldwide, the question of how qualified a teacher should be to teach primary English gets correspondingly burning. The answer does not simply come about as appropriate proficiency level and methodological expertise, as research to date has addressed various issues surrounding these two qualities. However, this research body has largely investigated smaller pieces of the puzzle which apparently implies the need for one that can offer a depiction of the big picture. The current paper attempts to bridge this gap with a thorough capture of seminal findings from latest research on issues related to language proficiency and methodology background of primary English teachers around the world.

Materials and Methods: The study makes use of secondary research method which involves synthesizing and analysing a diverse range of documents with a view to providing an in-depth overview of all the issues discussed

Results: The analysis reveals that findings from latest research stand quite contrastive to the popular notions and standards set for these two focused qualities namely language and methodology competence. This is primarily due to the fact that teachers in each studied setting are liable to a unique host of contextual and policy factors that deter them from a full translation from knowledge and beliefs to practice.

Conclusion: While that language proficiency and methodological expertise are generally agreed as the two main qualities of primary English teachers, the standards for them should be tailored to different settings in consideration of both contextual and policy constraints.

Key Word: *Young Learner; Primary English Education; Teacher Qualities; Teacher Training; Educational Policy*

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I. Introduction

It has been widely recognized that the age at which children start their English education is getting lower and lower around the world. In their article, Enever & Moon (2010) calls this phenomenon as a global revolution which is sparked by three major factors including the widespread “the younger the better” belief (Rich, 2018), parental pressure (Enever, Moon & Maran, 2009) and the desire of many governments to possess human resources that are highly competent in English in this globalization era (Enever & Moon, 2010). Responding to this trend, a multitude of countries have introduced English as a compulsory subject at primary level. However, these nations find themselves facing a shortage of qualified teachers who are at the heart of any successful primary English education program (Hayes, 2014). As a temporary remedy to the situation, many schools attempt to include different kinds of teachers in the education of English including generalist primary educators with limited English, specialist English teachers who are not originally trained to teach primary and native speakers without any educational background (Garton, Copland & Burns, 2011). This practice does pose a concern to the outcomes of these programs as none of the mentioned groups are trained and qualified to specially teach primary students. Regardless, the question remains how a qualified young learner teacher should be defined. Most scholars agree that a proper proficiency level and knowledge of young learner (YL) language teaching methods are the two indispensable qualities (Hayes, 2014; Rich, 2014; Cameron, 2001 & Blanc, 2015). While a large body of research has been conducted targeting at different pieces of the puzzle, hardly have there been any article that manages to capture the issues surrounding these two major qualities. The article, therefore, seeks to fill in this gap with an attempt to address the sole research questions:

“What insights has research offered to account for the necessary qualities of a primary English teacher?”

II. Material And Methods

According to Thorne (1994), secondary research aims at bringing the latest research results together to provide readers a full depiction of what insights relevant research has to offer on a specific topic. This is in line with the objective of the current study which is to give an overview of related on research on issues concerning proficiency levels and methodology capability of primary English teachers around the globe. This is not to mention the fact that the study was conducted at the initial dawn of Covid-19 pandemic during which travel restrictions were put in place to stem the spread of this potentially fatal virus. Therefore, a study using desk research method was deemed to be the most appropriate measure on account of the circumstance. In order for such an analysis to shape, painstaking study of diverse materials ranging from scholarly articles, books, policy and terms, etc. was undertaken for essence ideas to be identified, analyzed and organized into themes that appear central to the topic.

III. Results & Discussion

YL Teacher's Level of Proficiency

It is still inconclusive as to the question of what is the necessary level of proficiency that an English teacher needs to attain to qualify as a teacher of YLs. In her book, Cameron (2001) rejects the misconception that YLs only need to learn the very simple language and concepts. Children actually can be very enthusiastic when talking about complex topics and have the potential of learning complicated language items. It is essential for language teaching at primary level to equip children with “a broad discourse and lexical syllabus”, so that later learning can build on for more future success (Cameron, 2001, p.xiii). Therefore, YLs are required to be responsive to the task and create as many learning opportunities as possible out of every context (Cameron, 2003). Capability of doing this will entail teachers' high level of proficiency and large vocabulary repertoire. Pinter (2017) pinpoints that teachers are the main source of input in the classroom and the model of language use in a YL classroom. Being highly competent in the language enables teachers to provide students with optimal scaffolding to push them to the next level of development. Research into the links between teachers' proficiency levels and children's learning is rather limited. Le & Renandya (2017) use observation method to analyse the lessons of three teachers and find that teacher's proficiency level is reflected in their classroom language use, which directly affects the outcomes of the lesson. Study by Buechel (2014) also evidences the influence of teachers' language competence on the YLs' performance of oral skills. The big question remains, however, is what should be the appropriate level that a teacher must attain to teach at primary level. Hayes (2014) maintains that YL teachers should achieve level C1 as describe on CEFR “to cope with the complexity of informal and incidental language required in the primary classroom” (p.24). Meanwhile, Bondi (2001) suggests the lower level of an independent user - ALTE level 3 (equivalent to B2 CEFR), but without any explanation related to YLs. It is obvious that these are just assumptions that do not offer any detailed and satisfactory explanation. Language Education Policy of different countries set different standards and use different measures to assess teachers' language proficiency. For example, Vietnamese teachers at are required to attain level B2 CEFR or equivalent, while Hong Kong devises their own assessment called LPATE that measures teachers' competence through conducting a lesson (Butler, 2019). Nevertheless, hardly any information is obtained from the reasons why these measures are reliable to assess YL teachers.

Research into this issue so far has come out with quite consistent findings that confirm the lacking language capability of YL teachers in almost every educational context. The most cited of these is by Butler (2004) which inquires teachers in three countries namely Korea, Taiwan and Japan about their perceived proficiency level in accordance with the desired level to teach primary students. The main findings were that the majority (over 80%) of teachers in all three countries felt their English competence was behind the qualifying mark and their perceived competence in productive domains outruns that in receptive domains. Although this study manages to include large sample and produce consistent results, its use of instrument and vagueness does pose question to its reliability. Specifically, participants are asked to self-assess their proficiency through only one survey consisting of Likert scale questions. The results would have been more reliable if another objective assessment was administered to measure their actual level. Besides, Butler (2004) does not specify what should be the ideal competence for primary English teaching. Le & Do (2012) also conducted a study into the language ability of 165 teachers in a Vietnamese primary school and found out that almost all participants were of levels ranging from beginners to pre-intermediate instead of B2 CEFR or equivalent. However, it is worth noting that the context of the study is a rural province in the north where unequal access to teacher training can be the major contributor to the findings. The situation may be different if the study was conducted in a big city. Furthermore, the study made use of an oral test format to which they did not specify any details regarding reliability and procedure of administration. There is a likelihood that the level of participants is not fully reflected through a speaking test. Finally, Habibi and Sofwan (2015) also come to the conclusion of the lacking competency of 15 YL teachers in the city of Jambi, Indonesia. Like the aforementioned study, this did not provide any information

related to test procedure and reliability except its being relevant to the most popular assessment previously used. Neither was the sample large enough, nor did the study make a detailed analysis of the result. It only presented the scores of the teachers and draw conclusion from that without dwelling on their performance in any specific domain or making comparison among them.

Although the mentioned studies all show that elementary teachers are not adequately competent in terms of language, they have made of use of different measures and failed to point out the desired level that the participants need to attain. For example, Butler (2004) only mentions that elementary teachers “need more than basic conversational skills” (p.268). Statistical findings also reveal the gap between teachers’ level and the required one in those countries where standards have been set (Butler, 2019). In 2014, just half of elementary English teachers achieved the required level B2 CEFR or equivalent, leaving the question whether this target level is relevant in the context of Vietnam (Le, Nguyen & Burns, 2017). These gaps suggest a move away from standardized tests as a yardstick of teachers’ competence. Instead, the proficiency of a YL teachers should be defined separately from any frame. Also, YL teachers should be given instruction and assistance into how to optimize their proficiency levels in accordance with the learning objectives set in different contexts (Butler, 2015).

Appropriate use of L1

Moon (2000) emphasizes the importance of teacher using the target language in classroom which serves to boost students’ motivation and is the source of exposure that students cannot have outside classroom environment. It has been pointed out that limited language competence has been the underlying reasons why many teachers make extensive use of L1 in classroom teaching, thereby depriving children of the adequate exposure to the target language (Moon, 2009; Enever & Moon, 2009; Young et al, 2014). For example, Moon (2009) cited her own study in which the majority of participants were found to make use of up to 80% of L1 instruction during classroom observations, while only resorting to English for the explanation of sentence structures and new words. In line with this study is the one by Kang (2008) which finds the exclusive use of Korean by English teachers in Korea, despite the government’s call for the Teaching English in English approach (TEE) (Hayes, 2014). Compared to the former study, the reasons given by the participants are different, which ascribes to the low proficiency of the students and the lack of confidence by the teachers when their proficiency is not native-like. Where the low competence of children is concerned, Moon (2009) argues that it all comes down to the teacher’s incapability of providing comprehension aids and fine-tuning their language to suit the children’s level. Studies by Yıldırım & Doğan (2010) and (Ekin & Damar, 2013) involves the participation of young learners who stated that they would prefer the use of L2-only instruction in English lessons. However, Kang (2008) suggests that TEE is not always practical and beneficial in very context, defending that the use of English only is likely to demotivate the students as they cannot grasp everything conveyed by the teachers. To support this view, Macaro & Lee (2012)’s study reported the preferences of Korean YLs towards code-switching over English-only instruction, as the latter may impose harsher cognitive loads on children in trying to comprehend teacher talk. However, the author also admits that their view may be influenced by the familiar instructional methods and their previous teacher. Kapur (2009) also mentioned the Indian government’s advocacy of L1 use in helping the children’s acquisition of another language. Regardless of this, both Kang (2008) and Cameron (2001) agree that the use of L1 can maximize its potential if carefully planned and selected by the teacher.

The quality of being native or native – like?

In their article, Marinova – Todd, Marshall & Snow (2000) suppose that the investment in any primary language education program will be valuable only if teachers are native speakers or possess native-like competence. Regarding the “native” matter, Le & Do (2012) express their firm belief that non-native teachers (NNESTs) prove to be better English instructors compared to the native ones. However, these authors do not elaborate on the explanation for their views. In response to the insufficient proficiency of local teachers and parental preferences, many countries seek to recruit native teachers (NESTs) from English-speaking countries (Butler, 2015). Parental bias towards NESTs as a source of standardized English has been identified by Chen (2011)’s study in which 60% of parent participants believes the recruitment of NESTs as a remedy for the shortage of teachers. Nevertheless, this poses a concern as to how qualified these native English teachers (NESTs) are to teach young learners. Luo (2007) investigated the perceptions and practices of team teaching between a group of NESTs and NNESTs in a local Taiwanese primary school through a combination of longitudinal interview sessions and classroom observations. The findings were that NNESTs reported challenges of collaborating with NESTs due to their lack of previous pedagogical background and inability to adapt teaching methods to the local context. Chen (2011) also mentioned the halt of a project sending NESTs to rural areas of Taiwan to compensate for the lack of qualified primary English teachers due to unsatisfactory

outcomes. However, he did not specify whether NESTs qualification was the underlying reason or not. Butler (2015) pinpoints that much of this happens owing to governments having yet to set a standard for the hiring practices of NS. Kang (2012) mentioned the efforts of some Korean language programs to replace unqualified NESTs with qualified NNESTs, yet he admits the challenge of persuading parents to change their preference of NEST representation.

Regarding the quality of being native-like, Nunan (2003) argues that such a native-like competence is not necessary for a non-native teacher (NNESTs), but without dwelling on any explanation. Sharing this view, Wang & Lin (2013) assert that using native-speaker as model of YL teachers will threaten the “professional identity” of these teachers (p.5). Research into this topic has come out with somewhat contradictory results to the mentioned notion. In the studies of Kang (2008) and Butler (2007a), primary English teachers in Korea and Japan report lack of confidence when using English for instruction in classroom, as their proficiency is nowhere near being native-like. Significantly, the latter study even finds out that Japanese teachers of English regard NESTs as the ideal teachers for young learners, and they have to rely on NESTs as input provider during classroom sessions (Butler, 2007a). Children participants in both Macaro & Lee (2012) and Butler (2007b)’s studies reveal their preference for NEST’s standardized accent and pronunciation over those of NNESTs. However, Butler (2007b) does not find any evidence regarding the influence of NNEST’s accent on the children’s listening comprehension performance. Cameron (2003, p.111) emphasizes the importance of having good pronunciation for English YL teachers, as the children depends largely on the teacher as the main source of language and are likely to “produce the accent of their teachers with deadly accuracy”. However, she does not mention that the quality of the accent must be native-like. Having a good pronunciation does not necessarily entail a standard accent.

TYEL-related qualification and proper pedagogical knowledge

Cameron (2001) resolves the misunderstanding that teaching children is a straightforward process and that any teacher can English to YLS with only very basic training. She highlights the fact that children’s world is not as complicated compared to that of adults, but teaching them is by no means an easy task. It is necessary for primary English teachers to have the ability to tap into the young’s world and extensive knowledge of children language learning as well as teaching. Nunan (2011) also asserts that teaching young children is very different from teaching adults, which requires the use of methods suitable for different age groups. In short, it can be said that teaching language to YLs must be taken seriously and teachers of YLs must be given the appropriate training to be qualified. However, YL teachers’ lack of the training required for the job has been addressed by extensive research so far. One study by Moon (2005) found that most of the primary teacher participants were previously trained to teach adults and older learners during their university degree. In line with this finding is the one by Emery (2012) which reports a huge number of participants having not been trained to teach the age group that they are currently teaching. Both mentioned studies, nevertheless, only point to the pre-service training of these teachers. It is worth noting that pre-service training programs in TYEL have not been widely implemented in Asian institutions. For example, English teacher education programs in many universities in Vietnam are found to incorporate very few modules related to teaching young learners instead of following a TEYL orientation (Nguyen & Nguyen, 2007). The same can be witnessed in Korean context where the majority of programs offered are related to primary education in general without any special focus on language teaching to this age group (Garton, 2013). In response to this situation, many elementary schools in the region offer the training to teachers who are currently in service with a view to improving their professional competence (Butler, 2014). Nonetheless, to what extent those in-service training programs are sufficient or efficient has not been resolved.

Influenced by the global factors, early language educational programs in many Asian countries now lays emphasis on fostering communicational ability for the children. For example, Vietnamese government sets the goal for enhancing children’s communicative competence at the top of its English educational agenda. This policy has been the driving force behind the promotion of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Task-based Language Teaching (TBLT) in primary English classes. However, the implementation of these pedagogical approaches by English teachers in these countries has not been effective, mostly due to the teachers’ lack of understanding as well as confidence, influence of traditional teaching methods and their underlying beliefs towards them (Enever & Moon, 2009). Butler (2005) conducted a study to compare the perspectives of elementary English teachers in Korea, Taiwan and Japan into the communicative activities they used in their class by incorporating the multivocal ethnography design. This allows the multiple perspectives to be gathered, together with the observation sessions conducted that contribute to the reliability of the results. Surprisingly, the study reported the implementation of these activities by the teachers without their understanding of the purposes of these activities. Butler (2005) attributes this to the teachers’ lacking knowledge of CLT and strategies to adapt it into their context. Moon (2009) analyses the lessons of two primary Vietnamese teachers and found that lessons are full of heavy grammatical drills and follow PPP method, which

suggests the influence of traditional teaching methods in existence for a long time. However, the author only analysed two out of more than twenty cases in her study, which may not be enough to present the big picture. In a study by Su (2006), participants are found to believe that an integration of exercises, rules and memorization is still necessary for students to achieve communicative competence. This belief seems to contradict with CLT conceptualization which suggests a move away from grammar-based instruction. However, the researcher does not provide any insight into how this belief is reflected in the teachers' practices and its efficacy. Yet, he made the claim that this combination can boost students' motivation and their autonomy. Lee (2014) conducted a large-scale case study research into 37 Korean elementary teachers to investigate their perceptions of CLT implementation. The results were rather surprising, as novice teachers who had better knowledge of CLT compared to senior ones were more negative towards its application. The reasons given were mainly related to their doubt for using English as a communicational tool in class and the curriculum pressure, implicating their lack of confidence and unwillingness to bring about changes.

Regarding the implementation of TBLT, Deng & Carless (2009) conducted a longitudinal study into the case of a primary English teacher in China through the use of various methods such as interview, observations and relevant document analysis to allow the triangulation of the findings. As the research was in the form of a case study, a rich and detailed amount of data was collected. It was found that the participant did not have a full grasp of the term "task" in TBLT and had difficulty linking task to communicative competence. Like the aforementioned study mentioned by Moon (2009), the lessons delivered by the participant in this research also consisted of practice, imitation and drills. Again, no generalization can be made out of this study, since its scale only concerns one case. Carless (2002) also studied the implementation of TBLT among 3 primary teachers in Hong Kong and found the links between their understanding of the method and the degree of TBLT application in their class. To be specific, teachers who were more knowledgeable TBLT-wise were able to make her lessons more TBLT-oriented.

These two teaching methods are traditionally applied for teaching adult classroom. Therefore, the issue remains as to how they should be adapted and interpreted when implemented with young learner classroom. Cameron (2002) supposes that such an adaptation is essential when taking account of the local factors; however, this may not trigger the desirable outcomes. The explanation is, according to Butler (2009), is that "teaching for communicative purposes" for YLs has not been conceptualized. Coupled with the implementation of these methods are other teaching practices including authentic material utilization and learner-centred teaching, which have yet to be investigated in a primary context and fully conveyed to the teachers.

On the other hand, large body of research also acknowledge that the implementation of communicative methods is also subject to other contextual constraints besides teacher-related factors. One of those is large class size which has long been a feature of Eastern education (Enever & Moon, 2009). Carless (2004) explains that large-sized class will cause teachers more problems regarding classroom management, especially in a YL classroom where higher level of discipline is needed. Teachers may also feel unwilling to organize students in a large class into groups for interactive activities, since it is more time-consuming. The overuse of mother tongue is also another issue for consideration, as it may hinder target language production of students (Carless, 2007). There is evidence that students are likely to make use of their L1 in completion of a task (due to their limited level of proficiency) instead of using the target language structure as intended by the task. Exam constraint should also be taken into consideration for its possibility to hinder the process of methodological innovation. In many Asian countries, so great is the pressure on their children to pass the formal exams that many teachers are dedicated to the preparation of children for these exams from primary years, leaving behind the necessity of implementing of interactive teaching methods (Enever & Moon, 2009). "Teach towards the test" has become a familiar concept in those educational contexts. Primary teacher participants in Deng & Carless (2010)'s study express concerns over the content of their teaching being affected by examination constraints, despite their favour for pedagogical innovations and efforts to make English lessons more communicative.

Assessment literacy

Mckay (2006) stresses the roles of assessment in language education programs, the most significant of which is informing teachers of student's learning progress as the basis for making decisions related to their teaching. Besides, assessment gives evidence of how students are improving in accordance with the curriculum goals. Parents can also be informed of their children's learning through assessment. Therefore, it is vital for teachers to gain an in-dept understanding and expertise in language assessment. However, the pressing fact is that many ELT teachers lack the proper understanding of principles underpinning language assessment. Berry, Sheehan and Munro (2019) use a combination of survey, interview and classroom observations to investigate European teachers' understanding of language assessment. The majority of participants are found to attribute assessment mainly to testing and rely on third party or ready-made materials for test design, which suggests their lack of confidence in designing their own assessment measures.

Language assessment with YLs proves to be more complicated than with adult learners (Pinter, 2017). Traditional paper-based tests often used with adults cannot reflect the actual ability of YLs whose writing skills are still lacking at early stages of learning. Furthermore, such tests are likely to cause stress and demotivation on YLs, especially when low results are announced. Therefore, teachers of YLs are held responsible for using age-appropriate and child-friendly assessment methods that can encourage greater learning and motivation among YLs (Pinter, 2017). Studies by Chan (2008) and Büyükkarcı (2014) both show the positive attitudes and beliefs of elementary English teachers towards using multiple formative assessment methods besides paper tests in class. However, the former study finds the match between the participants' beliefs and assessment practices, while the findings in the latter show the opposite. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that classroom practices of participants in the latter study are more affected by contextual factors such as class size, schedule and curriculum pressure. The mismatch, however, is only identified by Büyükkarcı (2014) in terms of the frequency of using formative assessment. Despite these notable findings, both studies reveal the incapability of participants in making these methods in line with formative purposes. This indicates the pressing truth that many YL teachers lack the required training for implementing language assessment (Mckay, 2006).

IV. Conclusion

This article has touched upon the most important issues related to the key qualities of YL teachers. Although a number of issues have been discussed, they all put down to the two most important qualities which are language competency and professional capacity. From all the research finding synthesized, a seemingly appropriate conclusion to draw would be that any YL teacher should possess these two qualities, regardless of being native or non-native. However, YL teachers' level of proficiency should be assessed using a unique measure which is tailored to meet the objectives of each educational context. Besides, CLT and TBLT methods are still in their infancy when applied in primary context. Teachers should be given enough training in the implementation of them and allowed to make adaptation taking account of the local factors. Moreover, YL should develop a proper understanding of the theoretical underpinnings and be able to combine formative assessment methods in their teaching, even in a setting vulnerable to other contextual constraints.

While a host of countries are facing the challenge of preparing a substantial number of qualified teachers for the initiation of primary English education, it seems their educational policy has not been very supportive enough to attract the needed personnel. In their overview article, Nguyen & Nguyen (2007) address the current shortage of qualified teachers in Vietnam as a result of various factors. First, many elementary schools in the country are not subsidized with adequate staffing quota for English teachers. Consequently, many of them are employed on a contractual basis, which cannot guarantee their long-term commitment. Besides, these teachers are entitled to very low payment and status, which leads to their undermined devotion to the profession. The goal that the government sets for English to become a compulsory subject at primary level towards 2020 has not been attained, as many schools lack the required personnel to do so. Additionally, there is no agreement among schools in the choice of textbooks to be used for primary students. Teachers have yet to receive adequate training on the most recent textbook series which are communicative-oriented (Nguyen, 2011). For example, all participants in Le & Do (2012)'s study reported attending just one-day training workshop on material development using the *Let's Learn* series. TEYL-oriented pre-service programs have not been widely offered, while in-service training has been rather limited to teachers in big cities where English is officially included in the curriculum. This suggests an inequality in access to the training needed for teachers who work in remote regions of the country.

On the basis of those constraints, the article strives to make several recommendations for improving the situation. First of all, those governments facing this should consider raising the payment and staffing quota for primary English teachers, especially in schools which suffer from a lack of qualified personnel. Second, teachers should also be given more sufficient training in the use the newly adopted textbooks, as the communicative focus of these is different from the grammar-based materials to which the teachers are familiar. There is also a pressing need for teacher training institutions in the country to formalize primary English teacher education programs in response to the increasing demand of early language learning. Hayes (2008) affirms that many countries now have every capacity needed for building a successful pre-service primary language teacher education program, as they have had adequate and highly trained professionals to help with such a daunting duty. As tackling those teacher-training issues will take long-term and hand-joining efforts from various parties, countries in a shortage of primary English teaching staff can leverage on short term measures (Hayes, 2008). One prominent of these is an effective training model called "*cascade model*" which entails key teachers being trained to become trainers of other teachers. The study by Vu & Pham (2014) has shed light on the positive results brought about by the model when applied with training primary teacher in northern and southern Vietnam.

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