

## A STUDY OF IRANIAN HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS' SELF- ASSESSED LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY

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### ABSTRACT

*Self-assessment can be used for a variety of purposes, including appropriate placement, diagnosis and feedback and teaching evaluation. The present study was an attempt to have an investigation into Iranian high school teachers' self-assessed language proficiency. To this aim, the researchers invited 56 high school English teachers from Golestan Province, Iran and conducted the present research and followed the statistical routines and came up with interesting results. Analysis of the results showed that there were statistically meaningful gaps between teachers' self-assessed current language proficiency and their desired language proficiency. Teachers realized the necessity to improve their own language proficiency, yet they needed more additional support from language educators and the schools where they work. Teachers' self-perceptions provided incentives for them to realize their insufficient language proficiency in their workplaces and to improve their language proficiency through further professional development. Iranian EFL teachers, practitioners, and supervisors in institutes are suggested to take the findings and conclusions of the present study into careful considerations in their teaching, self-assessment and lesson planning in order to promote language achievements.*

**KEYWORDS:** Language proficiency, self-assessment, self-monitoring, teacher evaluation

### INTRODUCTION

Many teachers can assess their own performance and teaching by collecting information of their classroom teaching process and classroom management. This is called self-assessment which necessities reflection on the part of the teacher. It is intended for personal professional development. According to Usharani (2012), this is done through a systematic and objective collection of teaching behavior and this information is used for taking decision to introduce necessary changes for better teaching in future. Self-assessment is done to gain a better understanding of one's own teaching process inside the class and one's own strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. This self-evaluation is necessary for teacher development.

It might be important to look at teachers' influence in English as a foreign language (EFL) classrooms so as to investigate why Iranian high school students have limited communication

skills. In an EFL context like that of Iran where English is neither the official language nor the language of daily use, teachers' oral output and classroom interaction might be the only opportunities for students to take part in authentic communicative interaction. Therefore, it is very important to look at teachers' language proficiency and how it affects their instruction and thus may influence students' language ability.

Any useful technique or method which is capable of promoting language achievement or language proficiency of the learners should be tried and implemented (Abdolmanafi Rokni, Hamidi & Gorgani, 2014). This matter is also important on the part of the teachers. It is evident that teachers' language proficiency affects their teaching effectiveness. This study focuses mainly on investigating teachers' actual level (self-assessed language proficiency hereafter) and the level they consider as the minimal level to teach effectively (desired language proficiency hereafter). By comparing the two levels, gaps in some skill areas can be determined.

This study was an attempt to investigate the Iranian high school teachers' self-assessed language proficiency. The researchers were eager to provide answers to the research questions addressing the problems teachers normally face during their professional job regarding language proficiency and development.

English has become the international language in the globalization of the world. Iran has responded to the growing economic needs of English communication by promoting English education nationwide. The role and status of English in Iran is higher than ever before in history, as evidenced by its position as a compulsory key subject in the national curriculum. English language is one of the main determinants for university entrance and a crucial requirement for well-paid jobs and promotional prospects in the workplace. English education has gained increasing attention in Iranian schools at all levels but the vast majority of high school English teachers in Iran are non-native speakers (NNS). These teachers might not have adequate language proficiency to promote a communicative language environment for students.

The high school English program provides four years of continuous and systematic instruction on the following basic skills: listening comprehension, speaking ability, reading comprehension, writing ability, pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar. According to the Ministry of Education, the objective of high school English education should be to prepare students so that they acquire basic communication skills, and to help them learn English language and culture so as to be able to respect and communicate with other cultures and nations in the era of globalization (MOE, 2000).

Basic communication ability has been the primary target of language teaching and learning in Iranian high schools; however, critics have repeatedly noted that in the Iranian high school EFL (English as a Foreign Language) contexts, language instruction has focused too intently on grammar and translation. The common way of teaching English can be described as both teacher-centered and test-driven. The method of traditional grammar translation is still widely used by English teachers, and English classrooms tend to emphasize knowledge acquisition rather than a

communication-oriented approach. As a result, students often acquire insufficient communication skills in high schools (e.g. Chen, 2002).

One way of overcoming these problems and moving towards teaching development is self-assessment or self-perception. In this study, high school NNS teachers from Iranian high schools were asked to self-assess their English proficiency as well as to specify the minimum level of proficiency that they feel are needed to teach English effectively at the high school level in seven skill domains (listening comprehension, speaking ability, reading comprehension, writing ability, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar) in order to find and fill the gaps between their English proficiency and the minimum level needed to teach effectively.

## BACKGROUND

### *Language assessment*

One of the key bases for instruction of English as second or foreign language is assessment. Assessment is a crucial activity in any instructional operation. As Lynch (2001) stated, assessment has undergone a paradigm shift, from psychometrics to a broader model of educational assessment, from a testing and examination culture to an assessment culture. The term "assessment" is often used in different contexts and means different things to different people. Most statistics faculties think of assessment in terms of testing and grading: scoring quizzes and exams and assigning course grades to students. But some typically use assessment as a way to inform students about how well they are doing or how well they did in the courses we teach. Therefore, new ways of assessment have been developed to demonstrate what students learn and what they can do with their own knowledge. These new ways are called "authentic" or "alternative" assessment.

During the past several years, there has been a great interest in using alternative assessment techniques (Hirvela & Sweetland, 2005). Alternative assessment techniques, assessing both process and product of learning (Genesee & Hamayan, 1994), providing useful, informative information (Clapham, 2000), and setting up a strong connection between assessment, teaching and learning which are different from traditional methods of testing.

Further, assessment has different types, from authentic to portfolio. However, here in this research, the focus is on the assessment on the part of the teacher, which is self-assessment. This self-assessment can be done through self-monitoring.

### *Teacher's self-monitoring*

Teaching is not something to be done in vacuum. Many teachers are interested in knowing whether teaching has been fruitful or not. Administrators, course supervisors, and students taking the course are among those. However, the teacher himself is the first who wants to know what type of teacher he is, what he is doing and how well he is teaching. So, having the ideas from principled pragmatism on his mind, he should do his best to become a critical teacher who can properly take the steps of self monitoring himself. Today, self-monitoring as a recently used term in English language teaching (ELT) is given special attention. The term comes from the new trends in ELT where teachers have central roles as researchers.

Self-monitoring or self-observation is defined by Richards, Plat and Plat (1992, p. 327) as “observing and recording information about one's own behavior for the purpose of achieving a better understanding of a control over one's behavior and its impact on students' growth”. In fact, teachers almost always overwhelmed with a sense of responsibility gain specific rights through this approach. They themselves achieve the role of an observer or supervisor and show the confidence in themselves by using more responsible attitude towards the system they are working for. The confidence in teachers is formed when recruiting and training them. Moreover, this approach in English language classes i.e. the experience of *self monitoring* help teachers feel at ease to become more autonomous in their teaching activities.

Improvement in teaching may be achieved through reflection. According to Richards and Nunan (1990), asking 'what' questions gives us a certain power over our teaching and the degree of autonomy and responsibility we have in our work as teachers is determined by the level of control that we can exercise over our actions. If teachers want to gain such control, they should be good self-monitors. Three parts are claimed as being central by Nunan and Lamb (1996) in any reflective teaching, including planning, implementation, and evaluation. It is right in the third part where ability to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching takes a key function.

Implementation of self-monitoring and its importance are summarized by Richards (1990) as follows:

- a) Teachers need feedback to improve their performance and self-monitoring is a good way to gain such feedback.
- b) It creates a good means of critical reflection on teacher's own teaching.
- c) It can help narrow the gap between teachers' imagined view of their own teaching
- d) It changes the responsibility of checking one's improvement in teaching from an outsider, such as a supervisor, to the teachers themselves.

Millrood (1998), while emphasizing the role of observation techniques, believes that there is a need for handy and time-saving observation techniques which can be used to reflect on the lesson that is being observed. He continues stating that observation activities may have different features: focusing on developing linguistic competence, pragmatic abilities, thought processes, background knowledge, etc.

The needs to consider a number of principles and self-monitoring have been emphasized by Richards and Nunan (1990) as follow:

1. The issue upon which the teacher reflects must occur in the social context where teaching occurs.
2. The teacher must be interested in the problem to be solved.
3. The issue must be 'owned' by the teacher-that is, derived from his or her practice.
4. Reflection on the issue involves problem solving from the teaching situation in which the teacher is located.

5. Ownership of the identified issue and its solution is vested in the teacher.
6. Systematic procedures are necessary.
7. Information (observations) about the issue must be derived from the teacher's experience of teaching.
8. The teacher's ideas need to be tested through the practice of teaching.
9. Ideas about teaching, once tested through practice, must lead to some course of action.
10. Hence, reflexive action may be transformed into new understandings and refined practice in teaching.

Further, Richards (1990) introduces three major approaches which are necessary for self-monitoring in teaching including personal reflection, self-reporting, and recording lessons. When we talk about teachers' self-assessment, this type of assessment should include personal reflection, self-reporting, recording the lessons, and interviewing (peers, colleagues, etc.). What comes in the next part delineates the processes which have been done based on what has mentioned above in order to help the researchers reach the goals of the study.

### ***Previous Studies***

There have been many studies which focused on self-assessment of teachers and language proficiency, both as independent and dependent variables. According to Saito (2002), the current trends in learner-centered language teaching approaches, and a growing interest in authenticity and inter-activeness have led to a greater interest in expanding the use of self-assessment. Therefore, implementing self-assessment into teaching and learning processes seems to be of high importance. That's why many research studies have been carried out regarding this factor. However, they have produced varying results which have made administrators and teachers skeptical about implementing self-assessment.

Cheng (2005) carried out a study into the reliability and potential benefits of incorporating peer assessment into English language programs. Undergraduate Engineering students attending a university in Hong Kong were asked to assess the English language proficiency of their peers – among other assessment criteria such as preparation, content, organization, and delivery – as exhibited in the seminar, oral presentation and written report of an integrated group project. Cheng (2005) compared the students' attitudes towards assessing both the English language proficiency and the other aspects of performance of their peers. The study also compared peer and teacher assessments. The findings suggested that students had a less positive attitude towards assessing their peers' language proficiency, but they did not score their peers' language proficiency very differently from the other assessment criteria. Students and teachers were different in their respective marking behaviors and the ways oral and written language proficiency were interpreted.

Chen (2008) in his study investigated students' learning to self-assess oral performance in English by comparing student assessment with teacher assessment. Twenty-eight Chinese students at a university in southern Taiwan participated in his study. The assessment program involved training, observation, evaluation, discussion, feedback, and response, including two weeks of training and 10 weeks of two-cycle assessment. The assessment components were developed by

the teacher and students collaboratively during the first week. The criteria included four elements within a five-level scoring standard. The comparison between self- and teacher assessment was analyzed in terms of scores and comments given over two assessment cycles. Results showed that self- and teacher ratings differed significantly in the first cycle of assessment, but were closely aligned in the second one. Comments generated by students themselves in the second cycle were more similar to the teacher's, becoming more positive and constructive. A majority of the students favored participation in assessment and considered self-assessment conducive to learning. Chen's (2008) study demonstrated that through feedback and practice, participating students make significant progress in learning to assess their own oral performance.

Butler and Lee (2010) examined the effectiveness of self-assessment among 254 young learners of English as a foreign language. Their study looked at 6<sup>th</sup> grade students in South Korea, who were asked to perform self-assessments on a regular basis for a semester during their English classes. The students improved their ability to self-assess their performance over time. A series of quantitative analyses performed by researchers found some positive effects of self-assessment on the students' English performance as well as their confidence in learning English, though the effect sizes were rather small. They also found that teachers and students perceived the effectiveness of self-assessment differently depending on their teaching/learning contexts. Individual teachers' views towards assessment also influenced their perceived effectiveness in implementing the new self-assessment practice.

Also, Fahim, Hamidi and Najafi Sarem (2013) carried out a study to first investigate the barriers that Iranian high school students face while speaking. This investigation was made by interviewing both students (language institutes and schools) and teachers. Teachers' comments on the students' answers and teachers' separate answers on the causes of speaking problems were elicited. The researchers then made a comparison between the willingness to communicate (WTC) of high school and language institute students after the reflection (self-monitoring) of the teacher. To achieve this purpose, 32 high school and 32 language institute students spent 10 sessions with a teacher who had previously reflected upon the speaking barriers collected from participants comments through oral interviews. The results of the study using teachers' own assessment clearly showed that language institute students were much more willing to communicate. Several reasons were also found to be highly important regarding students, teachers, and course materials.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

As stated above, this study aimed to examine the perceived English proficiency of high school NNS teachers in Iran and to investigate the desired levels of proficiency that the teachers felt were necessary for them to teach English at the high school level. The research questions are:

RQ1. What do NNS high school teachers perceive to be their current and desired English language proficiency level?

RQ2. Does a gap exist between their perceived current and their desired proficiency levels?



## METHODOLOGY

### *Design*

A quantitative study was used to investigate teachers' perceptions of their current and desired language proficiency and to explore whether there was a gap between the two levels. If there was, how and why would the gap exist between the two levels?

### *Participants*

For the purpose of this study sixty participants from Golestan Province, Iran were invited. Since only 56 given questionnaires were returned, the researchers only took fifty-six of them into consideration. The participants were all high school teachers, 31 male and 25 female teachers. Forty-eight of them had B.A. degree and the remaining eight were M.A. holders with three to twenty years of teaching experience.

### *Instrumentation*

The instruments used in this study included a background information sheet and a questionnaire.

#### *Background Information Sheet*

To collect the data and to describe the teachers' profile, sixty participants (B.A. and M.A. holders) were asked to fill out a background information sheet consisting of some items, such as gender, age, education background, years of teaching experience, and so on. Fifty-six complete questionnaires were returned. Participants' contact information and their willingness to have the follow-up interviews were also asked in the background information sheet.

#### *Questionnaire*

The researchers adapted the questionnaire from Tang's (2007) study, because it was well-designed and employed for a similar purpose. In the questionnaire, teachers were required to indicate the levels corresponding to their self-assessed language proficiency and (of course versus) their desired language proficiency in order to teach effectively. The same scale was used for teachers to indicate these two levels, ranging from 1 to 6 with 1 meaning a very low level and 6 referring to the highest level. The teachers could rate their proficiency between levels as well. It is to be noted that the questionnaire proved to have a reliability of 0.79.

### *Procedure*

At the beginning of the research, the researchers explained this research to the teachers (participants) and asked those who wanted to volunteer to come to class 20 to 30 minutes before their regular class time. All appropriate ethical procedures were conducted for the data collection. Participants of the study were informed about the purpose and procedures of the research and were asked to sign a consent form before the researchers. After that the researchers handed out the questionnaires. To start, the researchers first handed out a background information sheet and a questionnaire. Then, they went over the questionnaire with the participants before they fill it out.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The questionnaire data showed that most teachers in fact believed that their current language proficiency levels were normally lower than the appropriate levels they considered for themselves to teach effectively. Analysis of the interview data provided teachers' perceptions of the possible reasons behind their self-rated inadequate language proficiency. It also provided insight into how to help teachers develop language proficiency. Table 1 shows the number of participating teachers, their level of education and their years of teaching experience.

*Table 1: Characteristics of Participating Teachers*

Years of experience	Number	Male	Female	B.A.	M.A.
1-5	15	31	25	48	8
6-10	18	-	-	-	-
11-15	15	-	-	-	-
15-20	8	-	-	-	-
Total	56	31	25	48	8

### *Analysis of the First Research Question*

RQ1: What do Iranian NNS high school teachers perceive to be their current and their desired English language proficiency?

Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics of the overall language proficiency of the two levels. It demonstrate that the maximum score of teachers' desired proficiency level is 38.00, which is in ordinal scale is 7 levels more than the maximum score of teachers' actual proficiency level which is 31. Furthermore, the desired level reveals an obviously higher mean and standard deviation than the actual level. The results showed that most teachers who participated in the study believed that their current language proficiency levels were lower than the minimal levels they conceive necessary to teach effectively. The results of the questionnaire revealed gaps between teachers' current language proficiency and their desired language proficiency.

*Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of the Overall Language Proficiency at Current and Desired level*

#### **Descriptive Statistics**

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Sum	Mean	Std. Deviation	Variance
Current	56	21.00	31.00	1451.00	25.9107	2.89059	8.356
Desired	56	28.00	38.00	1967.50	35.1339	1.96906	3.877
Valid N (listwise)	56						

Moreover, as it can be seen in table 2, the overall evaluation of teachers' self-assessed current proficiency and their desired proficiency shows that the mean score for the current and desired levels are 25.91 and 35.13, respectively. It should be mentioned here however that since language proficiency is not something separate, for the seven skill domains the marks have been added up. Each mark stands for a participating teachers' self-assessed level and their desired level. There is a tendency for all language teachers to rate their desired language proficiency level higher than their current language proficiency level with no exception. The overall comparison discloses a gap between the two levels; it was therefore necessary to examine whether this gap was meaningful based on statistics or not.



### Analysis of the Second Research Question

RQ2: Does a gap exist between their perceived current and their desired proficiency levels?

In order to find out whether there was a gap existed between their perceived current and their desired proficiency levels, a paired samples t-test was run. Table 3 shows the mean score of the current and desired proficiency levels. As it can be seen, it is 25.91 and 35.13 for current and desired proficiency levels, respectively.

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics of the Perceived Current and Desired Proficiency Levels

#### Paired Samples Statistics

		Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean
Pair 1	Current	25.9107	56	2.89059	.38627
	desired	35.1339	56	1.96906	.26313

Table 4 shows the correlation co-efficient between current and desired proficiency levels. As it can be seen,  $r=.647$ ,  $n=56$ ,  $p<.005$ . Therefore, there exists a strong relationship between the two levels and it is statistically meaningful.

Table 4: Correlation Co-efficient Results between Current and Desired proficiency

#### Paired Samples Correlations

		N	Correlation	Sig.
Pair 1	Current & desired	56	.647	.000

As it can be seen in table 5, the sig (P value) is .000 which is much lower than the .05 ( $\text{sig}=.000<.05$ ). Hence, it means that there actually is a significant difference between the language teachers' perceived current and their desired proficiency levels.

Table 5: Paired Samples t-test for Current and Desired Level of Proficiency

#### Paired Samples Test

		Paired Differences		95% Confidence Interval of the			Sig. (2-tailed)
		Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	Lower	Upper	
Pair 1	Current desired	-9.22321	2.20726	.29496	-9.81432	-8.63211	.000

### Discussion

Self-assessment is done to gain a better understanding of one's own teaching process inside the class and one's own strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. According to Usharani (2012), this type of assessment can help teachers work more on their language development. The findings of the present research are in line with the ideas of Brutt-Griffler and Samimy (1999) and also Kamhi-Stein (2005) that teachers' self-perceptions and beliefs can play an important role in influencing their instructional practices and developing their language proficiency. Freeman and Richards' (1996) ideas also support this view.

Scannell (2012) identifies five characteristics that are logically related to the quality teacher education programs. Below are those five characteristics.

- 1- Institutions should have a concept about what a good teacher is and should have designed a program to educate such a person.
- 2- Candidates accepted into teacher education should have characteristics predictive of success in the program and teaching.
- 3- Institutions should have good relationship with schools so as to ensure the opportunity for candidates to observe and work with teachers who are good role models.
- 4- Faculty should be knowledgeable about their content area and nature of schools, and they should be assisted in their efforts to stay current with scholarship in teaching and schooling.
- 5- Teacher education should be well managed and should have adequate resources to meet its goals.

Therefore, regarding the importance of improving teachers' language proficiency and the claims of Scannell (2012), it might be concluded that one of the best strategies for teachers to develop their language proficiency starts way before they start their teaching, before entering university and while they are in university pursuing their education.

## CONCLUSION AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Undoubtedly many teachers can assess their own performance and teaching by collecting information of their classroom teaching process and classroom management. This is called self-assessment which necessities reflection on the part of the teacher. It is intended for personal professional development. According to Usharani (2012), this is done through a systematic and objective collection of teaching behavior and this information is used for taking decision to introduce necessary changes for better teaching in future.

Self-assessment is done to gain a better understanding of one's own teaching process inside the class and one's own strengths and weaknesses as a teacher. This self evaluation is necessary for teacher development. Finding their weaknesses and bridging the gap between what they are and what they should be, teachers can improve their teaching quality and self-efficacy. According to Khatib, Sarem and Hamidi (2012), teachers' self-efficacy is directly related to students' academic success; hence, any improvement on the part of the teachers gained through self-evaluation would probably lead to positive effects on students' learning outcomes.

This study attempted at finding teachers' own view about themselves through self-assessing techniques. Self-assessment is a more modern view towards teacher education programs. The study described the characteristics that a good teacher should have. The main focus of this study was on the investigation of strong points and weak points of the teachers as has been observed through the interviews. By reflecting on and carrying out a needs analysis, teachers are expected to develop their teaching ability and language proficiency.

Iranian EFL teachers, practitioners, and supervisors in institutes are suggested to take the findings and conclusions of the present study into careful considerations in their teaching, self-assessment and lesson planning in order to promote language achievements.

### ***Suggestions for Further Studies***

Interpretations of the findings of this research also led to several suggestions for further researches.

1. Learners may benefit more from teachers who implement self-assessment techniques in their classrooms. It is suggested that a study be done regarding the effect of self-assessment on increasing learner motivation.
2. This study was conducted in Golestan province, in the North of Iran. The present study can be duplicated nationwide over a longer period of time. It can also be carried out in different learning contexts such as schools, institutes and universities.
3. This research focused on both male and female teachers as participants. The role of the gender was not under investigation here. Another study considering the role of gender may provide us with further insight in this area.
4. It is suggested that a research study be carried out in order to find out the differences existing between the perceived current and the desired proficiency levels in each of the seven skill domains (listening comprehension, speaking ability, reading comprehension, writing ability, pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar).

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