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Investigating the relationship of target language proficiency and self-efficacy among nonnative EFL teachers

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ABSTRACT

Target language proficiency and pedagogical capabilities are considered to be the two main teacher attributes necessary for second/foreign language teaching. Drawing on this notion, two hypotheses were tested: (a) minimum threshold levels of language proficiency and pedagogical capabilities exist and (b) teachers' language proficiency and pedagogical capabilities are interdependent. A total of 167 Korean secondary school English as a foreign language teachers self-reported their English proficiency, teaching efficacy, and frequency of English use in their English instruction. A sequential multiple regression with interaction was employed to investigate the relationship between these two teacher attributes and their contributions to English use as an outcome behavior. The results supported both hypotheses. Only teachers above the minimum threshold levels of both attributes showed positive associations among the two competences and English use. Above the minimum levels, language proficiency and self-efficacy were interdependent, magnifying each other's impact on the teaching behavior. The results pointed to the beneficial potential of continuous development of linguistic and pedagogical competences even after teachers possess the minimum levels. Given that previous research has assumed nonnative teachers as one homogenous group and explored language proficiency and self-efficacy separately, this study addresses important theoretical, methodological, and practical gaps.

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1. Introduction

Stakeholders of the English as a second/foreign (L2) language education, such as teachers, students, parents, program administrators, and policy makers, generally perceive teachers' English language proficiency as one of the most essential characteristics of a good English teacher (Braine, 2010; Llurda, 2005). As a result, insufficient language proficiency is often recognized as one of the biggest obstacles that nonnative teachers face in their employment, teaching, and professional development (Braine, 1999; Chen & Goh, 2011; Hiver, 2013). Furthermore, the deterioration of language proficiency when nonnative teachers are not regularly involved in L2 contact and training becomes another detrimental factor in their continuous professional development (Fraga-Cañadas, 2010).

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However, ample empirical evidence shows that language proficiency alone does not account for successful language teaching. For example, in a comparative study on native and nonnative English teachers at US K–12 schools (Kamhi-Stein, Aagard, Ching, Paik, & Sasser, 2004), nonnative teachers' perceived English proficiencies were slightly lower than those of their native-speaking counterparts, but these nonnative teachers indicated higher degrees of competence in their instructional abilities and comfort in teaching English to bilingual students than native teachers. Other studies have similarly found that nonnative teachers' shared linguistic, cultural, and educational backgrounds with students enable them to engage in pedagogical practices that are relevant to local settings (Canagarajah, 2005; Llurda, 2005; Mahboob, 2010). Accordingly, the recent discussion of teacher qualifications in the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) profession has realized the danger of equating native speakers as competent teachers and has attended to the unique contributions of nonnative teachers (Braine, 2010; Faez, 2011; Mahboob, 2010). This line of research implies that as long as nonnative teachers have certain levels of proficiency in the target language, they can positively exert their own bilingual and bicultural attributes, which monolingual native teachers may lack. In addition, other professional virtues, including professional handling of a class in the multilayered teaching context as well as accumulated experiences and expertise of teaching, influence the ways that different teacher qualifications become manifest in actual teaching (Liu, 1999; Moussu, 2010; Nemtchinova, 2005; Park, 2012).

Thus, it seems that both English proficiency and professionalism are important and the interplay of the two qualifications, rather than native status, explains the relative strengths of English teachers. Then, to what extent are language proficiency and pedagogical competence necessary for quality English instruction? What is the relationship between language proficiency and pedagogical competence? Thus far, only a handful of studies have explored the relationship of linguistic and pedagogical competences, and most of them have generally indicated an intuitive or anecdotal association based on narrativized experiences (Hiver, 2013; Kamhi-Stein et al., 2004; Lee, 2009; Nunan, 2003). In doing so, these studies either explored the two competences separately or treated them synonymously. A few studies more directly investigated the relationship by exploring *teachers' self-efficacy*, a term referring to teachers' perceived teaching competence (Chacón, 2005; Eslami & Fatahi, 2008; Yilmaz, 2011). However, these studies mainly relied on bivariate correlational analyses to examine the relationships between sub-scales of self-efficacy and sub-skill areas of language proficiency. This analytical approach did not fully take into account the fact that individual teachers have differing sets of linguistic and pedagogical competences. For example, when an individual teacher has a lower level of linguistic competence but a higher level of pedagogical competence, what would this teacher's teaching look like? Thus, their findings cannot sufficiently explain the simultaneous influence of these two competences on teaching, resulting in inconsistent results among the studies. In addition, these three studies cannot answer the question to what extent teachers' differing qualifications matter for quality teaching. The purpose of this study is to address these two questions by investigating the relationship between English proficiency and pedagogical skills and their influences on teaching behavior among nonnative English teachers.

2. Literature review

2.1. Professional qualifications of nonnative English teachers

The perception that defines English teacher qualifications solely based on native status and target language fluency is still prevalent in the TESOL profession. In his influential book *Linguistic Imperialism*, Phillipson (1992) questioned the notion that the native speaker is a superior language teacher and claimed that the greater facility that native speakers are believed to have can be developed through training. He additionally contended that nonnative teachers have certain qualifications that native speakers may not possess. Since then, much empirical evidence has been documented to identify nonnative teachers' qualifications and strengths (Braine, 1999; Llurda, 2005; Shin, 2008). As a result, a growing number of researchers have argued that target language proficiency should not be equated with nativeness and that professional preparedness as teachers, achieved through accumulated experiences of training and teaching, should also be considered as another main criterion for assessing the qualifications of both native and nonnative teachers (Braine, 2010; Cook, 1999; Mahboob, 2010; Medgyes, 1994; Pasternak & Bailey, 2004).

However, a predominant line of research has saturated the field with comparative studies on native versus nonnative teachers (e.g., Árvá & Medgyes, 2000; Medgyes, 1994; Moussu, 2010). This methodological approach has often fallen into the comparative fallacy of again relating teacher qualifications to language backgrounds and dichotomizing individuals as belonging to homogeneous groups, even when it was difficult to determine whether identified divergences between nonnative and native teachers were related to nativeness or other factors, such as training and teaching experience. Furthermore, the definitions of the terms *native speaker* and *nonnative speaker* have become blurred in today's increasingly multilingual world (Canagarajah, 2005; Cook, 1999). As a result, the use of the two terms in one study for a comparative purpose is likely to cause an inherent methodological weakness.

Going beyond the comparative research involves reevaluating the qualifications of nonnative-speaker teachers in their own particular teaching contexts. One step in this direction has been focusing on the perceptions and challenges experienced by nonnative teachers (e.g., Golombek & Jordan, 2005; Liu, 1999; Park, 2012; Trent, 2012). The utilization of qualitative research methodology in these studies, such as narrative and thematic analyses, has its own position and importance in describing teachers' diverse stories and experiences. Nevertheless, as Moussu and Llurda (2008) argued, "the excessive reliance on this kind of work poses clear danger to the field" (p. 333) because qualitative methodology is limited in answering questions that relate to the broad generalizability of findings over a large population. For example, as Braine (2010)

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