

Feature articles

Teaching is speaking

Daniel Xerri explores teacher language proficiency.



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In his opening plenary at the 2015 IATEFL Conference, Donald Freeman examined a series of central ideas that are often taken for granted in the field of ELT. These ideas, he said, act as the foundation for a raft of common prescriptions informing teachers' work. They are rarely questioned but are instead allowed to shape our thoughts about how teaching and learning work, our role in

the classroom, and the main objective of English teaching. Unchallenged, these ideas take on the semblance of common sense, becoming what he called myths that govern what teachers do, and while not necessarily right or wrong they have both useful and misleading aspects. Freeman (2015) argued that unless these myths are examined in terms of these two aspects, ELT would remain 'frozen in thought'. He reinforced this point by quoting Caleb Gattegno: 'You can be *lived* by your preconceptions, which will make you a bad teacher.'

I would like to discuss Freeman's thoughts on proficiency and how these relate to the practice of testing teachers' spoken English.

... to ensure that teachers are able to carry out a range of tasks and routines effectively ... it is important for locally developed speaking proficiency tests to step into the breach left by tests of general language proficiency

Proficiency as an instructional goal

One of the myths Freeman examined was that of student proficiency as the goal of instruction. He explained that what is 'frozen' is the relationship between what teachers do in the classroom and the way they think about how this travels outside it. Freeman maintained that proficiency is based on the assumption of nativeness, i.e. the idea that those who are native speakers are considered to have proficiency while those who are non-native are striving for

it. However, both nativeness and proficiency are misleading concepts. While nativeness is a geopolitical construct, not a linguistic one, Freeman—borrowing a term from Lee Shulman—described proficiency as a usefully wrong idea. The appeal of proficiency is that it 'refers to the ability to perform real world tasks with a specified degree of skill' (Nunan 1987: 4). However, proficiency is problematic due to the fact that as a construct it 'has not been empirically derived but has been assumed to exist because the concept is intuitively appealing' (Nunan 1987: 5). According to Free-

man, proficiency is experientially based and the very thing that makes it sound right also makes it very hard to define.

Freeman maintained that the proficiency myth is useful for teachers because it tries to describe how once people get good at language in the classroom, this will travel with them into other contexts. However, in order to describe those aspects of language that allow it to travel, he declared, it is important to speak of boundaries and how these establish a person's ability to do something in one situation but which may not actually travel to other situations. The concept of general language proficiency does not admit to a clear set of boundaries to measure what people can actually do but instead is used to cover a broad territory. It misleadingly implies that if students are able to do something with language in the classroom then they are able to do it outside the classroom in a time and place of their own choosing.

Teacher classroom language proficiency

Freeman's alternative to the myth of general language proficiency is the concept of 'proficiencies', that is to say people require different proficiencies that are always situated in particular contexts and bounded by a particular social practice. Just as general English proficiency cannot address all the linguistic needs of students in the world beyond the classroom, it cannot fully specify the demands on teachers' use of language inside the classroom when teaching the language. Hence, an ESP-derived approach to language proficiency is required whereby teacher education focuses on the specific linguistic needs of teachers when enacting their role. According to Freeman *et al.* (2015: 131), such a 'focused approach converts the problem of language improvement from one of general proficiency to one of specialised contextual language use, which is likely to be more efficient in bringing about practical impacts on teacher classroom efficacy and student learning outcomes'. This acts as the foundation for the construct of English-for-Teaching, i.e. the essential language skills needed to prepare and enact the lesson in a standardised curriculum in English (Young *et al.* 2014).

Together with a consensus panel of language teaching experts from all over the world, Freeman inventoried the classroom tasks and routines that teachers need to perform. These were grouped into three functional areas: managing the classroom, understanding and communicating lesson content, and assessing students and giving them feedback (Freeman *et al.* 2015: 134). This led to the identification of exemplars of the language used in the process. For Freeman this was a way of defining the classroom language proficiency that a teacher needs to employ. As a skill, speaking features heavily in most classroom tasks and routines.

Assessing teachers' speaking proficiency

One of the main implications of Freeman's English-for-Teaching is that teacher language assessment needs to change so that the focus is on classroom language proficiency rather than general language proficiency. This is imperative given that 'Creating assessments that actually look like the work teachers do in the classroom can help build stronger validity arguments. Unfortunately, much teacher language testing rarely adopts such an approach, often leaving teachers to question its value (Freeman *et al.* 2015: 138). One solution to this problem is in the form of locally developed tests of classroom language proficiency.

A few weeks after the IATEFL Conference, I attended a three-day workshop at the University of Copenhagen on performance-based testing. The workshop preceded the EALTA Conference and it was facilitated by April Ginther and Nancy Kauper (2015) from Purdue University, USA. They argued that those wishing to assess a specific population (e.g. teachers of English in a particular context) should ideally develop their own language test and their own rating scales. A test should cater for the needs and range of abilities of a target population operating in its own specific context.

In the workshop, Ginther and Kauper drew on their experience of working on Purdue University's Oral English Proficiency Test (OEPT). A locally developed test for international teaching assistants (TAs), OEPT assesses the speaking proficiency of those graduate students wishing to teach in exchange for a tuition waiver. It is made up of tasks based on the kind of university domain knowledge that TAs require or activities they would need to engage in (for example, reading aloud or responding to a text). Although these TAs would not be teaching English, the OEPT exemplifies how a locally developed test can address the classroom language proficiency required of prospective teachers. Something similar exists at Roskilde University in Denmark. Its Certification for Teaching in English as an International Language (CTEIL) evaluates the English language skills required by a lecturer teaching in an international classroom context. The certification consists of the recording of an actual teaching session where a lecturer would be disseminating knowledge, organising group work and engaging students in discussion. Both the OEPT and the CTEIL differ from standardised language proficiency tests in that they do not

focus exclusively on candidates' general English language competences (i.e. pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary).

Recognising the value of locally developed tests of classroom language proficiency, a regulatory body within the Ministry for Education and Employment in Malta initiated the development of a Spoken English Proficiency Test for Teachers (SEPTT). This was in response to a request from the local ELT industry to ensure high levels of speaking proficiency amongst practitioners. SEPTT will test teachers' ability to use spoken English for a variety of functions, including conversing, explaining, presenting information, and giving feedback. Local ELT and assessment experts will develop the test, which will replace the general speaking proficiency test currently in place. Unlike what happens in the OEPT and the CTEIL, Native English Speaking Teachers (NESTs) will not be exempt from attaining the required band in SEPTT in order for them to teach English in Malta.

Teaching obviously involves much more than speaking. However, speaking proficiency is most probably the main pillar upon which a teacher's classroom language proficiency rests. Hence, in order to ensure that teachers are able to carry out a range of tasks and routines effectively in the classroom while being understandable to their students it is important for locally developed speaking proficiency tests to step into the breach left by tests of general language proficiency.

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