

Inflated proficiency self-assessment and its potential impact on language teaching: A Taiwan-based study involving teachers of English in elementary school settings

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Abstract

There is a widespread belief that communicative language teaching necessarily involves using the target language for all of the time in the classroom. However, those who advocate exclusive use of the target language in classroom settings may not always be fully aware of the potential negative consequences of this advocacy. With reference to a study involving teachers of English in elementary schools in Taiwan, it is argued here that teachers believe that their own target language proficiency is higher than it actually is, attempts by teachers to use the target language at all times can have unfortunate consequences.

Introduction

In Taiwan, children now begin learning English in Form 3 of elementary schooling. This has created a need for more elementary school teachers who are able to teach English and this, in turn, has led to the development of a number of training courses and programs and to the creation of locally produced textbooks that are intended to reflect the communicatively-oriented national curriculum guidelines (Her, 2007). However, there has been for some time, and continues to be, considerable disquiet about the English language achievements of Taiwanese students and this disquiet appears not to be without foundation.

So far as the teaching of English to young learners is concerned, as Dai (2002) and Yu (2003) have observed, many of those who argued that children should begin to learn English before entering Junior High School relied on the argument that young learners learn languages more easily than older learners. They relied, in other words, on some version of the critical period hypotheses (Penfield & Roberts, 1959), according to which there is a critical period after which language acquisition ability rapidly deteriorates. The problem is that, irrespective of the merits, or otherwise, of this hypothesis in relation to first language acquisition, it appears not to apply in contexts where children are learning a language in a classroom setting for, at best, a few hours each week. Except to the extent that they have a longer period of time in which to develop proficiency, very young language learners do not appear to have an advantage over older learners in classroom settings (see, for example, Genesee, 1987; Rixon, 1999; Sharpe, 2001). Nevertheless, the majority of Taiwanese parents appear to believe that there is no time to lose if their children are to have a bright future: "Don't lose at the very beginning" (Liu, 2002). In this, they are not alone. There is a global trend towards the introduction of languages in elementary school (Graddol, 2006, p. 88).

It was partly as a result of pressure from the public that the Taiwan Ministry of Education decided to gradually decrease the age at which English is introduced in schools. This began with a recommendation that the teaching of English should begin in Grade 5 of elementary schooling from 2002 rather than in the first year of secondary schooling (Ministry of Education (Taiwan), 1998). Because this was a

recommendation rather than a regulation, it led to the co-existence of a number of different systems throughout the country. In 2002, only 11 of Taiwan's 25 cities and counties had followed the Ministry's recommendation. Of the other 14, one introduced English at Grade 4, three at Grade 3, three at Grade 2, and seven at Grade 1 ("English Education", 2002). Even in 2003, according to a research project sponsored by the Citisuccess Fund and National Teachers' Association, ninety per cent of elementary schools in Taiwan were not following the Ministry's recommendation. Although all cities and counties throughout Taiwan were introducing English at some point in elementary schooling (including Taipei City, I-Lan Country and Hsin-Chu City), more than 80% of public elementary schools were offering English programmes to their first grade students.

In order to address this chaotic situation, the Ministry of Education decided to introduce nationwide standardized regulations for English at elementary school level. There was much debate and disagreement about the appropriate stage at which English instruction should be introduced, with many researchers recommending Grade 3 ("Introducing English from Third Grade", 2003). On November 21, 2002, in a formal oral report to the Education Committee, the Secretary to the Minister of Education, Legislator Yuan, announced that English was to be introduced at Grade 3 (when the majority of children are aged 9) in all schools from 2004 or 2005. In response, many of the schools that were then introducing English at Grade 5 announced that they would immediately move towards introduction of English at Grade 3. This exacerbated an already serious problem of under supply of qualified teachers of English at elementary school level. The Taiwanese Ministry of Education responded by recruiting teachers from new sources, by increasing training opportunities, and by organising language proficiency testing of elementary school English teachers (Ministry of Education (Taiwan), 2004, August 23).

Reducing the age at which English is introduced in schools was, in part, a response to the widespread perception that the English language proficiency of Taiwanese college entrants and college graduates was not at an acceptable level. Another response, one that has come directly from parents, is to send children, often from a very young age, to kindergartens in which English is used all or part of the time and/ or to after-school and week-end English programmes in private language schools. It has been estimated that in 2004 an average of eighty per cent of Taiwanese children had had some experience of learning English before they encountered it in their official school programme ("Win from the very beginning", 2004). The percentage is even higher in urban school districts such as Taipei city. As a result, teachers have to cope with a situation in which young learners in schools have had a wide range of different English language learning experiences, or none at all, when they begin to learn English at school. Partly in response to this, and partly in response to more general concern about the effect of introducing children to English at a very early age, the Ministry of Education announced in 2004 that English should not be taught either as an individual subject or in an immersion environment in kindergartens. There is, however, little, if any, evidence of any change in behavior as a result of this, with advertising for these programmes appearing to have continued unabated. Furthermore, there is some evidence that the best of private kindergartens and cram schools may be offering extremely effective and stimulating programmes that make effective use of a far wider range of resources in English than are typically used in public elementary schools (see, for example, Chang, 2007).

As Shih and Chu (1999, p. 1) observed at the end of the 1990s, the new curriculum guidelines for the teaching and learning of English in schools, which were introduced in 2001 as part of the *Grade 1~9 Integrated Coordinated Curriculum* - itself a response to the challenges posed by of increasing global competitiveness, - recommend a communicative approach to the teaching of English. Although no attempt is made in the guidelines to define precisely what is meant by this, it is clear from a review of the overall content of the guidelines (Her, 2007) that the intention is that the target language should be used as much as possible, that a wide variety of text-types and activities (including group work and pair work) should be introduced, and that learners should be encouraged to engage in authentic and meaningful communication (communication that has a function over and above that of language learning itself). Using the target language as much as possible in the language classroom poses problems for teachers whose target language proficiency is not high. However, teachers over-estimate their own proficiency, they also under-estimate these dangers.

The Taiwanese public educational system was not satisfactorily prepared for the significant changes foreshadowed in the new curriculum or for the teacher training demands that inevitably accompanied it, particularly as they related to the teaching of English to very young learners. The changes took place hastily and without adequate consultation and explanation. The result is that there is considerable confusion and uncertainty surrounding the teaching of English in elementary schools. So far as preparation for this type of teaching is concerned, there are four categories that are considered acceptable:

- Members of the public with a high level of English proficiency who took a two-year *Primary School English Teacher Training Programme* (PSETTP) which was available from 1999 to 2000;
- Graduates with an English-related degree, or graduates (any degree) who have undertaken a one year graduate Certificate in teaching English at primary level;
- Primary school teachers who can demonstrate that they have a level of proficiency in English equivalent to 213 or higher on a computer-based TOEFL test or high-intermediate level of in the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT);
- Trained primary school teachers who have participated in a variety of local government English training programmes (Ministry of Education, Taiwan, 2004, July 7).

What counts as a high level of proficiency in relation to the first category is a score (claimed to be equivalent to of 600 or above in the TOEFL) in an English Language Proficiency Test, available to teachers and members of the public, introduced in 1999 and sponsored by the Ministry of Education. This test is said to be based on based on the General English Proficiency Test (GEPT). Teachers who cannot demonstrate a sufficiently high level of competence in English in other ways (by, for example, gaining a score of 213 or higher on a computer-based TOEFL test or high-intermediate or above in the GEPT), may take this test. Teachers in the penultimate category are not required to undergo any training in the teaching of English.

In addition to, or as an alternative to attending pre-service training courses, a large number of teachers of English in Taiwanese primary schools attend in-service courses offered by a range of providers, including local government, teachers' colleges, private training institutions and textbook publishers. These in-service courses vary widely in terms of both content and quality. As Chang (2007, p. 4) has noted, primary school teachers of English are trained by different institutions (normal universities, teachers' colleges, and public and private universities that have established faculties, departments and graduate schools of education) and each of them has different standards. Furthermore, the public perception is that the training provided has not changed in line with the changes in policy and curriculum. This is indicated in the following headline from 中央日報 (Central Daily News) on 2001, October 19).

師資培育落差大準夫子巧婦難為

A big gap between teacher training and ELT curriculum reform makes it difficult for teachers-to-be to teach in real classrooms

Selected literature on teachers' target language proficiency

The importance of incorporating personal proficiency development into training programmes designed for those for whom the target language is an additional language has been emphasised by a number of writers, many of whom refer specifically to the need to include appropriate classroom language (see, for example, Butler, 2003, p. 5; Cullen, 1994, p. 163; 2001, p. 27; Murdoch, 1994, p. 257; Shih, 2001, p. 90, Shih & Chu, 1999, p. 5; Shrum & Glisan, 1994, p. 61; Snow, Kamhi-Stein & Brinton, 2006, pp. 262-264). A number of writers on language teacher education have also stressed the importance of providing trainees with knowledge *about* the English language and the ability and skill to use that knowledge in practical teaching contexts (see, for example, Butler, 2003, p. 5; Rausch, 2001, p. 1; Richards, 1998, pp. 4-5).

According to Murdoch (1994, p.253), high proficiency in the target language is often "the most valued aspect of a non-native teacher's competence" and Cullen (1994, p. 164) notes that teachers need to "improve their own command of the language so that they can use it more fluently and . . . confidently in the classroom" in order to teach English communicatively. Thus, Cullen argues that the language improvement component of teacher training courses should be "specifically linked to the kind of language the teachers will need to use in the classroom, e.g. for giving instructions [and] eliciting ideas and suggestions from the students" (p. 163). More recently, Cullen (2001) has not only repeated his earlier emphasis on the value of competence and confidence in using English in the classroom, but has also argued that although it is the most important skill for English teachers all over the world, it is often neglected in pre-service and in-service training courses. He has therefore suggested using videos and lesson transcripts to "develop awareness of, and promote competence in the language needed for various types of classroom activity, such as eliciting ideas and contributions from the students, giving instructions, explaining, giving feedback and dealing with errors" (p. 27). For Shrum and Glisan (1994, p. 61), the training of teachers of foreign languages in primary schools must involve "[acquisition of] proficiency in [the] foreign language" as well as "expertise in integrating language instruction into their curricula". Shih (2001, p. 90), with particular reference to the training of teachers to deliver English language programmes in primary schools in Taiwan, argues for the inclusion of both language

training and teaching methodology, noting in particular that teachers need not only to understand what is meant by ‘communicative language teaching’ (given its significance within the Taiwanese curriculum) but also need to develop sufficient oral proficiency in English to apply the principles and techniques associated with communicative language teaching in their classrooms. Butler (2003, p. 5), in discussing the preparation of teachers of English in Taiwan, Korea and Japan, argues for the incorporation of a number of components, including proficiency development. Chen and Johnson (2004, p. 136) observed that “very little information is available about the current English language proficiency achievements of students following different programs in different institutions” and that this is one of the factors that makes the establishment of proficiency benchmarks problematic. Three years later, however, using an English C-test¹ that had initially been developed for use in a major European study involving 25,000 students of a number of different languages in seven European countries (see Coleman, 1996), Her (2007) reported on her survey of the proficiency achievements of 681 Taiwanese students at the point of entry to BA degrees and 297 at the point of exit from BA degrees, noting the wide variation in proficiency, with individual scores differing by as much as 64 percentage points in the case of exit-level students. At the point of exit from BA degrees, the mean percentage C-test score (including students for whom English was a major and minor component of their studies) was 12.4%. The mean percentage exit score for students majoring in English was 15.2%. For students for whom English was not a major subject, the mean percentage exit score was 11.3%. Overall, the mean percentage exit core of the Taiwanese students was 13.25%. In the case of the European students who were tested in English, the mean percentage exit score was 53.5%. Of the 297 students who participated in the exit C-tests in Her’s (2007) study, 123 (41.41%) provided information about their performance on other proficiency tests. Comparison of the results of the C-test with the students’ results in other proficiency tests suggests that the overall average score of 13.25% in the C-test is roughly equivalent to an ‘elementary’ level score in the GEPT or score of between 255 and 400 (out of a possible 900) in the TOEIC.

Butler (2004) conducted a study in which teachers of English in three countries (204 from Korea; 206 from Taiwan; 112 from Japan), were asked to assess their own proficiency in five domains (listening comprehension, oral fluency, vocabulary in speech, pronunciation and grammar in speech) on a 6-point scale, from 1 (the lowest level) to 6 (the highest level). Not only were the Taiwanese teachers’ self-assessment proficiency ratings consistently higher than those of the Korean and Japanese teachers (an average of 3.87, 3.03 and 2.67 respectively) but the gap between that level and the level they considered necessary for teaching English adequately in elementary school was smaller (0.6 as compared to 0.62 for the Korean teachers and 0.82 for the Japanese teachers). In particular, in the areas of speaking (oral fluency, oral vocabulary, oral grammar and pronunciation) and listening, the overall self-assessed ratings of the Taiwanese teachers were, in all cases, higher than those of the other teachers. This raises an important issue in relation to the Taiwanese Ministry of Education’s recommendation that English should be used as much as possible in the classroom.

It is argued here that self-assessment of proficiency can have as much impact on classroom practices as can actual proficiency.

Research questions

Underlying the research reported here was the following research question:

How do a sample of teachers of English in elementary schools in Taiwan assess their own level of proficiency in English and does the language they use in the classroom indicate self-assessed proficiency is generally accurate?

Methods

A self-completion questionnaire, which included questions on a range of issues relating to the teaching of English in elementary schools in Taiwan, was designed in English, translated into Chinese, and trialled. That questionnaire, the final version of which included 35 questions, was then distributed to 300 teachers who either (a) attended an in-service teacher training program held in Taipei, Hsinchu, Taichung, Kaohsiung, Hualien and Penphu, or (b) were personally known to the researcher. The decision to use a sample of convenience rather than a random sample was determined by the fact that unless a researcher is working in an official capacity for government, it is not possible to secure a list of the names and contact details of teachers of English language in Taiwan. There were 166 responses to this questionnaire (a response rate of 55%), which included one question that asked participant, using a scale (see *Appendix*) based on the International English Testing System (IELTS).² The lowest band on the scale was 1 (i.e. has a few isolated words), the highest was 9 (i.e. fully operational command of the language: appropriate, fluent, accurate, with complete understanding). Also included in that questionnaire was a question that asked participants to select any methodological approaches they personally favoured, selected from the following list: grammar translation: structural; functional; self-access; communicative; task-based; topic-based; other).

A second questionnaire, prepared in English only³, and focusing on teacher training (pre-service and in-service) was developed and trialled. The final version of that questionnaire included 33 questions, including questions about any pre- and in-service training programmes that respondents had participated in. That questionnaire included the following questions:

Did your course include a component whose aim was to further develop your own language proficiency?

Were you provided with some useful classroom language (e.g., **Look! Listen! Answer the question! Pairs! Groups!** etc.) and given advice about how to introduce it and use it?

Email messages were sent to teachers known to the researcher who had participated in the first questionnaire-based survey asking whether they would be willing to participate in a further survey involving both a questionnaire and an interview. These messages outlined the aims and nature of the study and asked whether the recipients (or elementary school teachers of English known to them) might be willing to take part. Twenty three possible participants were identified in this way. In each case, the potential participants were contacted by telephone. The aims and nature of the research were outlined again and it was explained that participation was entirely voluntary and that the identity of participants would not be revealed in the reporting of the research. Of the 23 who initially indicated that they might be willing to participate, 13 decided at this stage not to proceed. All of the remaining ten were

homeroom primary school teachers with responsibility for teaching English and who had had some training in the teaching of English. All of them not only completed the second questionnaire but also took part in a semi-structured interview, conducted by phone in Mandarin Chinese. Although these interviews included a number of questions that related directly to questions included the questionnaire, the questions were not presented in any particular order, generally being included where they were relevant to the teachers' own discourse. Interview participants were also encouraged to raise any issues that they wanted to discuss.

Finally, twenty English language lessons taught by some of these teachers in Taiwanese elementary schools were recorded and transcribed and then analyzed in terms of a range of criteria derived from a review of literature on effective teaching of additional languages to young learners.

Findings

One hundred and forty five (145) participants in the first questionnaire-based survey responded to the question asking them to assess their own proficiency in English. Their overall self-assessed proficiency levels and their self-assessed proficiency levels in reading, writing listening and speaking are indicated in *Figures 1* and *2* below. The number of respondents who placed themselves in each of bands 6 – 9 in reading, writing, listening and speaking are indicated in *Table 1* below.

Figure 1: Overall self-assessed proficiency ratings

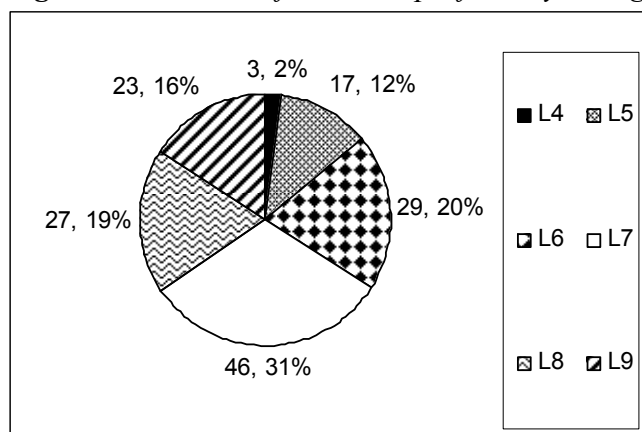


Figure 2: Self-assessed proficiency ratings for reading, writing, listening and speaking

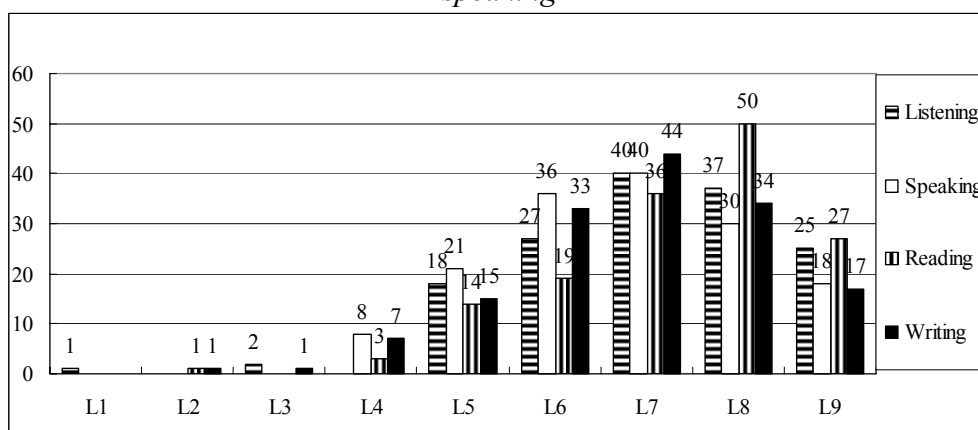


Table 1: Self-assessed proficiency in reading, writing, listening and speaking: Numbers in each of bands 6 – 9

Reading				Writing				Listening				Speaking			
L6	L7	L8	L9	L6	L7	L8	L9	L6	L7	L8	L9	L6	L7	L8	L9
19	36	50	27	33	44	34	17	27	40	37	25	36	40	30	18

As *Figures 1* and *2* and *Table 1* indicate, the self-assessed proficiency ratings were, overall, very high, with, in terms of overall proficiency, with 75% of respondents locating themselves in bands 6 – 9. In relation to each of the skill areas, the following number and percentage of respondents located themselves in bands 6 – 9: reading (132/80%); writing (128/77.5%); listening (129/78%); speaking (124/75%). In this connection, it is relevant to note that only three of the participants indicated that their first language was English, the others indicating that it was Mandarin, Hakka or Taiwanese.

All 166 participants in the first questionnaire-based survey responded to the question about their favoured methodologies. Of these, 103 (63%) selected ‘communicative’. Of the 10 participants in the second survey (involving a questionnaire and semi-structured interviews):

- four were graduates of the Primary School English Teacher Training Programme (PSETTP) offered between 1999 and 2000;
- three had completed a four year degree, majoring in English, that included training in primary school teaching, one component of which was the teaching of English;
- two (H & I) were graduates who majored in English and had completed a primary level teaching Certificate that included a component on teaching English;
- one was a graduate who majored in English and who had completed a local government training programme in the teaching of English lasting for one week.

All seven of those who had completed a training programme that was not combined with the completion of a degree in which they majored in English indicated that personal proficiency development was not included in their training programmes. There would, in any case have been little point in including a proficiency development component in the one week training course attended by one of the participants.

In response to the question about whether their training course included the provision of some useful classroom language (e.g., *Look! Listen! Answer the question! Pairs! Groups!* etc.) and, if so, whether they had been given advice about how to introduce it and use it, two of those who had attended a PSEPPT course indicated in a questionnaire response that they had. However, it emerged during the interviews that this had amounted, in both cases, to being given a handout for reference. Furthermore, both indicated during the interviews that their course tutor believed that their level of proficiency was sufficiently high to make explicit discussion of classroom language unnecessary. In addition, another of the participants indicated during the interview not

only that there had been no specific reference to classroom language during the version of the PSETTP she attended, but also that she believed that there was no reason to have included such a component given the high level of proficiency of the course participants.

Of the three participants who had completed a four year degree that included training in primary school teaching, one component of which was the teaching of English, only one indicated that they had been given advice about classroom language, it emerged during the interview that, as in the case of two of the PSEPPT programme participants, this had been confined to a handout. Once again, it was observed that the course tutor had indicated that further assistance was unnecessary because the trainees' English language proficiency was considered adequate to the task.

In the observed lessons, the teachers talked for an average of 80% of the lesson time and there were problems associated with the attempts made by teachers to use English as much as possible. Frequently, their English was inaccurate as indicated in the examples below, where errors have been underlined:

Now I want to do the pairs work./ What is the pairs work? /Please do the pair works./ Okay, today we have *some new for us*./ Very good, so look at here./ When we started at? /And let's who, let's who. / Okay, and would you something about today./ Okay, the boy is a better./ You have to talking the sentence. /I got two rule. You just come back from your trip, right?/ Next turn will girls./ I want someone tell me how was trip./ Are you a elephant?/ Red, I am bad, and she winner./ Sky are blue./ Back the table.

Discussion

Overall, the Taiwanese teachers involved in Butler's (2004) study rated their English language proficiency higher than did the Korean and Japanese teachers and in my own study, the self-assessed proficiency ratings of the teachers involved were very high. However, Her's (2007) study suggests that the English language proficiency of Taiwanese students who have completed a Bachelor's degree in which English is a major or subsidiary subject is very much lower than that of European students who have done so and may, in fact, be, overall, very low indeed. Why, then, did the teachers involved in my study rate their proficiency so highly? There are a number of possible reasons for this. One of these may be the fact that members of the public who were granted entry to the PSETTP programme were regarded as having a high level of proficiency if they gained a score in the Taiwanese English Language Proficiency Test sponsored by the Ministry of Education and introduced in 1999 that was judged to be equivalent to 600 or above in the TOEFL although no research has been conducted that clearly indicates that performance in these two tests can be validly compared. Another reason may be that Taiwanese teachers who have a degree in which they have majored or minored in English assume that this means that they have a high level of proficiency in English. In addition, several of the teachers involved in my study reported that tutors on their training courses considered it unnecessary to include a component dealing with classroom language because participants' already had a high level of proficiency. Whatever the reason for the overall high self-proficiency ratings of the teachers involved in my study, the frequency and type of inaccuracies observed in the 20 English lessons taught in

Taiwanese elementary schools that I observed suggests that these self-assessed proficiency ratings are not an accurate reflection of their actual language proficiency. In the lessons I observed, the teachers used English for most of the time in class. They may have felt confident in doing so precisely because they considered their English language proficiency to be adequate to the task. However, the result was that much of the language the students heard in class was inaccurate. Furthermore, the language used by the teachers in class to give instructions was sometimes beyond the students' current level of understanding and this often caused confusion and uncertainty. What all of this indicates is that those who recommend use of the target language in class for all or most of the time should give careful consideration to the possible impact of this recommendation in cases where teachers lack training in classroom language and may, in addition, have an inflated view of their own proficiency.

Endnotes

1. The C-test was developed by Raatz and Klein-Braley (see, for example, Coleman, Grotjahn, Klein-Braley, & Raatz, 1994; Eckes & Grotjahn, 2006; Dörnyei & Katona, 1992; Jakschik, 1996; Klein-Braley, 1985, 1994a, 1994b; Raatz, & Klein-Braley, 1982; Raatz, Klein-Braley, & Mercator, 2000) at the University of Duisburg. It is similar to the cloze test except that in the C-test what is sometimes referred to as 'the rule of two' is applied, that is, the second half of every second word is deleted from the second sentence on. For a discussion of the theory of reduced redundancy on which C testing is based, see, for example, Oller, 1976 and Spolsky, Bengt, Sako, and Aterburn, 1968.
2. The IELTS proficiency testing system is jointly managed by the British Council, IELTS Australia (a subsidiary of IDP: Australia) and the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations Syndicate.
3. Respondents were urged to discuss any aspects of the questionnaire that they found difficult to interpret during later telephone interviews. In the event, none of the 10 participants indicated that they had had difficulty in interpreting any aspect of the questionnaire.

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Appendix: Proficiency scale used

1. **Non-user**
A few isolated words.
2. **Intermittent User**
No real communication possible except the most basic information using isolated words or short formulae in predictable situations to meet immediate needs. Great difficulty in understanding spoken and written language.
3. **Very Limited User**
Conveys and understands only general meaning in very familiar situations. Frequent breakdowns in communication.
4. **Limited User**
Basic competence is limited to familiar situations. Frequent problems in understanding and expression. Not able to use complex language.
5. **Modest User**
Partial command of the language, coping with overall meaning in most situations though likely to make many mistakes. Should be able to handle basic communication in familiar areas.
6. **Competent User**
Generally effective command of the language in spite of some inaccuracies, inappropriate usages and misunderstandings. Can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
7. **Good User**
Has operational command of the language with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriate usages and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally understands and uses complex language well and can follow, and produce, detailed reasoning.
8. **Very Good User**
Fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriate usages. Misunderstandings may occur in unfamiliar situations. Handles complex, detailed argumentation well.
9. **Expert User**
Fully operational command of the language: appropriate, fluent, accurate with complete understanding.