



## Revealing the Secrets of the English Teacher's Excellent Proficiency: An Interview Study

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### Abstract

This study tries to shed light on what makes the English teacher's proficiency excellent and how these factors help the English teacher achieve excellent proficiency. One female English teacher from a private secondary school participated in this study. Her excellent English proficiency is proven by some proficiency test certificates such as TOEFL and CEFR. Data were garnered through a series of semi-structured interviews based on well-prepared interview guidelines. The principles of data saturation were applied to ensure the credibility of the data. The data analysis was done by employing thematic content analysis. The results suggest that there are four main factors that contribute to the English teacher's excellent proficiency. These factors include high self-motivation, long learning experience, diverse kinds of exposure, and various kinds of practices. Several affective factors like the feeling of fun, enjoyment, and interest also contribute to the process of language learning and acquisition which leads to excellent English proficiency. Further studies on English proficiency are still encouraged with different methods, settings, and contexts.

### Keywords:

*English as a foreign language, English proficiency, English teacher, interview study.*

### INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, English is determined as a lingua franca over the world. English has been widely used for communicative purposes in lots of countries. This raises the demand for excellent English language teaching programs as English has become a basic need for

many people (Marashi & Azizi-Nassab, 2018). In addition, many countries around the world have included English in their state curricula. This phenomenon also gives an impact on an increased demand for excellent English teachers as well (Faez, Karas, & Uchihara, 2019).

Due to many factors, English proficiency becomes more important in many contexts (Namaziandost, Neisi, Kheryadi, & Nasri, 2019; Yusuf & Novita, 2020). In general, proficiency is suggested to become the main objective of language learning and teaching. It is because the level of proficiency can be measured and categorized usually into elementary, lower intermediate, upper intermediate, and advanced. Indeed, proficiency is very important in English language teaching since it plays essential roles within teaching, learning, and assessment (Harsch, 2017). In Thailand, English is also treated as a foreign language like in Indonesia. English teachers and their students in Thailand formal education have paid much attention on proficiency as the central goal of English language teaching and learning (Tan & Phairot, 2018). For an English teacher, proficiency level becomes one of the most essential competencies to be developed. It has been also an important issue and still growing in the body of literature (Nhung, 2018).

In a foreign or second language, proficiency is determined to encompass the aspects of being able to do something with a language ('knowing how') and knowing about it ('knowing what'). In other words, language proficiency involves communicative abilities, knowledge systems, and skills of language users or learners. It is clear that proficiency can also be considered as the meaningful and accurate application of a person's communicative competences (Harsch, 2017). Language proficiency also means as a personal ability to use a language for various communicative purposes. Some characteristics of excellent proficiency can be seen from the mastery of the language itself. For example, people having excellent proficiency can comprehend the language without problems, express various ideas clearly through oral and written communication, and have comfortable interaction with other language users (Renandya, Hamied, & Nurkamto, 2018).

It is generally known that English proficiency has become an essential resource for English teachers to do their jobs. English teachers' proficiency are expected to support the goals of teaching (Freeman, 2017). In addition, competencies to teach English usually include content knowledge, teaching skills, and the ability to teach in English which is often affected by English teachers' proficiency. In other words, the more one knows of a language, the better prepared one is to teach it (J. C. Richards, 2017). Thus, attempts to develop the quality of English language teaching over the world have prioritized English teachers' proficiency as it is determined as an essential part of teacher expertise (Canh & Renandya, 2017).

Studies on English proficiency have been paid much attention by English language teaching scholars. It can be notified from numerous publication on this area concerning both English learner's proficiency and teacher's proficiency. Studies on learner's proficiency, for example, are carried out by Hsieh & Wang (2019); Meisani, Hamied, Musthafa, & Purnawarman (2020); Namaziandost et al., (2019); A. Nugroho, Zamzami, & Ukhrowiyah (2020); Pratiwi (2020); and Tschirner (2016). Besides, studies on teacher's proficiency are done by Canh & Renandya (2017); Faez & Karas (2019); Köksal & Ulum (2019); H. Richards, Conway, Roskvist, & Harvey (2013); Wulyani, Elgort, & Coxhead, (2019); and Yusuf & Novita (2020). However, it is still advantageous to carry out a study on this topic towards a unique person or community having their own way in

achieving English proficiency to enrich the literature. It is also more valuable if the person being investigated is an English teacher.

With these in mind, this study aims to scrutinize the secrets of an English teacher's proficiency which are observably unique and worthy to investigate. Therefore, this study searches answers for these following questions: 1) What makes the English teacher's proficiency excellent? and 2) How do these factors help the English teacher achieve excellent proficiency?

## **METHOD**

This study is an interview study aiming to discover the secrets of the English teacher's proficiency. The participant of this study is a female English teacher at a private secondary school in Klaten, Jawa Tengah, Indonesia. She was 29 years old and had five years teaching experiences at the time of this study. Her real name is not shown in this study. Instead, she is given pseudonym "Ana". Most importantly, she has excellent English proficiency proven by several proficiency test certificates such as TOEFL and CEFR. She obtains her excellent proficiency in some unique ways which are worthy for investigation to enrich the literature about how to achieve excellent English proficiency, especially for English teachers. Before participating in this study, she had agreed with the informed consent.

Data were garnered through semi-structured interviews based on well-prepared interview guidelines. The interviews were carried out several times to ensure the credibility of the data by applying the principles of data saturation. The interviews were stopped when the data were rich, thick, and saturated. The data were then analysed by employing thematic content analysis. First, the data are transcribed. The data were then intensively read for several times. Unnecessary and redundant data were deleted. The data were later categorized into several themes. The emerging themes were displayed and supported with essential excerpts. The analysis was also done thrice in different times to ensure the credibility of the results.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

Drawing on the interview data, several empirical findings are revealed and categorized into some key themes based on the research questions. These key themes include self-motivation, long learning experience, exposure, and practice. The results are shown in this section by presenting several important excerpts drawn from the interview data. The participant's name is changed with a pseudonym. Relevant studies and other previous literature are then presented to discuss the results further.

### **Self-Motivation**

The first part of the results concerns on the self-motivation owned by the English teacher. She shows high self-motivation of learning English. This self-motivation is forced by the feeling of need towards English mastery. She is also motivated by one TV program broadcasting news in English language when she was a child. In addition, she has some dreams which really motivate her for learning English continuously such as pursuing master degree abroad and being an excellent role model for her students regarding English proficiency. Here are several excerpts which show the English teacher's self-motivation of learning English.

*I expose myself to lots of English learning resources because I feel that I myself who need it.*

*I am much motivated by myself. In the beginning, I was interested in learning English because I saw an Indonesian in a news TV program who is very fluent in speaking in English. I wanted to become like that. It just looks cool for the little me. In fact, the more I learn the more I am interested in learning English. I also want to become an excellent role model for my students. Moreover, I hope that I can write more in English in both academic and popular contexts, such as mass media. My dreams really motivate me to continuously improve my English.*

It can be clearly seen that her self-motivation comes from internal intention. It strongly comes from her internal feeling, not external factors such as reinforcement of her parents or encouragement of others. Besides, it can be traced that she is really inspired by an Indonesian who can speak English fluently in a TV news program. It seems that seeing an excellent role model can inspire and motivate someone to learn English. It is possibly easier to happen when we are still young. Other important things which also motivate her are her dreams. She has some dreams which, of course, encourage her to continuously develop her English proficiency time by time. As explained previously, she wants to study abroad, become an excellent role model for her students, and create more writing in English. These wishes become such kind of motivation booster for her.

Individual professional development such as staying up-to-date with the newest issues in English language teaching, enhancing teaching competency, and developing language competency is generally driven by teachers' motivation (H. A. Nugroho, 2018). It is also asserted by Wulyani et al., (2019) that self-motivation to keep learning is necessary for English teachers on an individual basis. Pratiwi (2020) reports in her study which involves fifteen English learners from Bali ranging from 19-23 years old that high intrinsic motivation motivates the English learners and contributes to higher English proficiency. However, low intrinsic motivation results in demotivation and lower English proficiency.

Cahya (2017) scrutinizes 195 students from four colleges in Malang. By using correlation analysis, the results suggest that there is a significant correlation between the students' L2 motivation and their English proficiency. Motivation does not become a special factor in the first language acquisition since language learners already receive lots of exposure. However, exposure is limited in second language context making motivation to play important role in language learning. The higher the motivation of an L2 learner is, the faster and the better they master the target language. It indicates that the students' English proficiency can develop when their motivation increases. It also confirms previous studies and theories which put motivation as an important factor in learning English as a foreign language.

A. Nugroho et al., (2020) investigate a female college student who has excellent English proficiency through a semi-structured interview. The findings indicate that she is highly motivated to learn English since she wants to get the best scores in English class, have an excellent job in her future, and actively take part in this globalization era. It is revealed that she has both intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Indeed, she always performs her best in each English class and commits to have a promising job in her future.

### **Long Learning Experience**

This second part mainly reports about long learning experience owned by Ana. Besides having high self-motivation, she has long learning experience of learning English. She has learned English since she was a child. For her, learning English is fun and interesting. She enjoys learning English very much. Ultimately, English becomes her most favorite subject at school. Here are some excerpts which depict her long learning experience.

*I want to be able to speak English fluently since I was still a child. It is because someday I watch VOA news program on television.*

*I am interested to learn English since I was a child. I ever joined English private course during my childhood. I feel that it is very interesting to pronounce the names of things in English and to have conversation in English as well. Finally, English is my favorite subject at school.*

Evidently, learning foreign languages such as English can be interesting and fun for children. It seems that it is easier to introduce a foreign language to children rather than elders. This can prolong the learning experience of English learners. Parents can provide an excellent role model and interesting atmosphere as well for their children to learn English. They can also enroll their children in English private course if they wish to do. Principally, English learners will have long learning experience when they learn English since their childhood and it is advisable to create interesting and fun learning atmosphere for them. In addition, Meisani et al., (2020) assert that it is important for teachers to consider students' age in planning, preparing, and implementing English language instructions. It aims to provide the most appropriate stimulation which encourages students to learn English.

Pratiwi (2020) also discovers that positive prior learning experience can enhance the college students' English proficiency. In contrast, negative prior learning experience can lead to lower English proficiency. The prior learning experience which can motivate and demotivate the students usually come from family's encouragement, the role of school and teacher, opportunity to learn English with native speakers, and abroad travelling experience. The prior learning experience and the students' motivation help them to appreciate their learning process and develop their current proficiency. Ultimately, students, parents, teachers, and schools are suggested to create positive atmosphere for English language learning to occur and provide better learning experience to flourish the students' English proficiency.

### **Exposure**

The third part focuses on discussing several kinds of language exposure which Ana gets so far. In fact, she gets exposure from many kinds of sources including English community, digital environment, extensive reading, and extensive listening. These varied language exposure enrich her language input. Ultimately, this phenomenon leads Ana to have excellent English proficiency. Here are some excerpts which show how Ana gets lots of language exposure in her life.

*When I knew that there was an English club in my junior high school at that time, I joined the English club immediately. My purpose is to be fluent to speak in English. At senior high school, I continued to join an English club. However, it was a debate*

*club. Since I already registered in the debate club, I continued my participation in this debate club. Fortunately, I got new skills besides speaking. I then continued to join a debate club when I pursued my undergraduate study at college since I felt that it was really fun. I really can develop my public speaking skill and critical thinking skill.*

*At college, there were many resources which I could access since I already had a gadget which can be used to access internet. I used my gadget for watching videos on YouTube, getting active in social media, and using many free downloadable applications for learning English.*

*In fact, it is really fun to read a book in its original language, not its translated version. However, I, of course, had difficulties when trying to read a thick novel at once in the beginning. Therefore, I then started to read some short stories first which were subsequently followed by novels. Now, reading an English novel is just like reading a novel in Bahasa Indonesia.*

*I also did extensive listening because I wanted to improve my conversational skills, look for entertainment, and develop my debating skills. I often watched English music videos, listened to English songs, and listened to English podcasts. At first, I had forced myself to practice listening until it became easier in a long time afterwards. Now, I am actually very comfortable listening to a lot of talks, shows, and broadcasts in English.*

Drawing on the excerpts, it is clear that the exposure comes from four main sources namely English community (English club and debate club), digital environment, extensive reading, and extensive listening. English club usually focuses on speaking activities such as speech and storytelling. Meanwhile, debate club concerns on debate competition. In fact, she began to join English community from junior high school. Then, she continued to enroll in English community until she pursued undergraduate study at college. It shows her consistency in getting involved in English communities for many years. Throughout these communities, she can learn a lot. She learns speaking skill, public speaking, and critical thinking. She also finds that joining English communities is really fun.

Evidently, she started to obtain another exposure through digital environment when she was a college student. At that time, she already owned a gadget. This digital environment is made up by some activities which can be done by utilizing a gadget. These activities include watching videos from YouTube, socializing through social media, and utilizing some free applications.

She also gets excited to read books in their original language which is English. She likes to read short stories and novels, for example. As time goes by, reading English novels is just like reading novels in her national language. It indicates that reading for pleasure or extensive reading contributes to her English proficiency. Similarly, it happens to extensive listening. She carries out several extensive listening activities such as listening English songs and podcasts. At the beginning, she forces herself to perform these activities. However, it makes her accustomed and comfortable to listen to many talks, shows, and other types of broadcasts.

English learners in Bali have more advantages since Bali is the most popular tourist attraction in Indonesia. They gain more exposure and have opportunity to learn English with native speakers who visit Bali. This exposure increases their self-confidence. Travelling to English speaking countries also gives students opportunity to build their confidence and enhance English proficiency as well. Nonetheless, a short time visit does not significantly develop English learners' proficiency (Pratiwi, 2020). It is found that consistent exposure and use of English really help to develop English proficiency gradually (Faez & Karas, 2019). In contrast, lack of exposure to English can diminish English teachers' proficiency (Wulyani et al., 2019).

Information technology becomes a meaningful resource for developing English pre-service teachers' proficiency in countries where English is rarely used in daily communication. It can facilitate exposure since exposure to authentic English communication is also very limited. Relevant learning technology really helps pre-service teachers to learn more meaningfully. Gradually, their English proficiency is continuously enhanced. It is essential for them to communicate with both native and non-native speakers of English from many cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Fortunately, information technology is also beneficial to facilitate the development of English pre-service teachers' pedagogy to teach English as a foreign language. For instance, a video of classroom practice can be analyzed by watching, pausing, and rewatching the video to reflect on how good classroom practice is done in the context of teaching English as a foreign language (Hadi, 2019).

A. Nugroho et al., (2020) report in their study that language exposure experienced by an English learner can come from classroom input and beyond classroom input. The classroom input refers to language input which is obtained inside classrooms through teaching and other academic activities. Both curricular and extra-curricular classes can affect an English learner's proficiency level. It seems that language teachers also play a pivotal role in learners' language development. In addition, the beyond classroom input is gained through several activities such as watching English movies, listening to English songs, and reading English novels which also cannot be underestimated. Carrying out such kind of activities in daily life undoubtedly can enhance the learner's English proficiency.

### **Practice**

The forth part mainly discusses about how Ana performs some practices to develop her English proficiency. Besides having various kinds of exposure, Ana also performs lots of practices to utilize her knowledge and skills of English. She carries out several activities which can shape her English proficiency. These activities include writing diary, writing blog, debating, and speaking. These practices can develop her English proficiency and amplify what she obtains from exposure. Here are some excerpts which indicate how she have practices to enhance her English proficiency.

*I often used new vocabulary to write diary and blog. At that time, I just used the vocabulary without looking at the context. The important thing is that I know the meaning. Writing the new vocabulary makes me easier to remember it. Commonly, I wrote daily stories, experiences, poems, and other free writing. Sometimes, I also wrote motivational words.*

*Speaking and listening skills can naturally improve by consistently having debate practices. In debate, we are forced to speak by delivering arguments and rebuttals as well as to listen to opponents' arguments and rebuttals at once.*

*I learn speaking by employing expressions which I obtain from YouTube videos or imitating how native speakers speak. Moreover, I learn writing by reading lots of excellent written texts which can inspire us in writing.*

Each kind of practice can develop certain aspect of English proficiency. For example, writing diary and writing blog can contribute to vocabulary mastery. Having debate practices consistently can enhance speaking and listening skills naturally. In addition, Ana shows some tips for having speaking and writing practices such as by using some expressions after watching some YouTube videos, imitating native speakers, and reading more excellent written texts to inspire us in writing.

Students can get stressed and their interest for studying can also decrease when their teacher does not give them opportunity to have practice. For children, practice is necessary to comprehend language, understand meaning, and generate suitable responses based on contexts (Pratiwi, 2020). In adult context, pre-service EFL teachers still lack of speaking skill because they rarely have speaking practice during their high school (Köksal & Ulum, 2019). Moreover, teachers can try to employ some cooperative learning activities such as group discussion, role-play, and debate to provide students with opportunity to practice several expressions which they learn in class. It is useful to enhance students' speaking skill (Namaziandost et al., 2019).

An English community can also facilitate an English learner to have practice. The learner can frequently have speaking practice even every day. It is consciously recognized that engagement in the English community significantly enhances English proficiency. Besides, having regular practice with boarding house friends can also develop English proficiency. In addition, supportive class situation can encourage the English learner to learn and practice English. These regular practices of speaking facilitate the English learner to modify obtained input and attempt to negotiate meaning when expressing statements to make the input comprehensible for interlocutors (A. Nugroho et al., 2020).

## **CONCLUSION**

This study confirms the findings of previous relevant studies on English proficiency. In light of the empirical data, it is really clear that the excellent proficiency of the English teacher is the results of high self-motivation, long learning experience, diverse kinds of exposure, and various kinds of practices. Some affective factors such as the feeling of fun, enjoyment, and interest also contribute to the process of language learning and acquisition which lead to excellent English proficiency. It is important to note that exposure can come from many sources such English community (English club and debate club), digital environment, extensive reading, and extensive listening. Practices can also be done through several activities such as writing diary, writing blog, debating, and speaking.

It is advisable for parents to facilitate their children to learn foreign languages in young ages. It aims to give them longer learning experience. Besides, self-motivation is very important as the internal motive for a language learner to successfully learn the target language. It is more important than motivation or encouragement from others. Of course, exposure and practice also play significant roles to achieve excellent English proficiency.



Exposure will provide us with language input and knowledge. Meanwhile, practice can enhance our language skills such as speaking and writing. Further studies on English proficiency are still encouraged with different methods, settings, and contexts.

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