

## Teachers' English Level Proficiency: Do Students Perceive It as a Threat or a Chance?

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### Abstract

This study examines students' expectations regarding teachers' English proficiency level at Muhammadiyah Malang University (UMM), Indonesia. The concepts of proficiency are various among scholars and educators. Scholars vary in their concepts of proficiency; they also have multiple dimensions and methods when assessing teachers' proficiency. However, students are rarely asked about their expectations of teachers' English Proficiency level due to their supposed incapability and irrelevance in assessing the tutors. This study utilized an interpretive approach that explained the subjective reasons and meanings underlying social actions and viewed the world from specific individuals' standpoints and experiences. Focus group discussion (FGD), and an open-ended questionnaire to gather the data, was employed. The FGD led to rich data because participants interacted at the same time about the topic being raised. The second-year students of the English Department at the University of Muhammadiyah Malang (UMM) were invited to participate. Regarding the teachers' proficiency, students' expectations fell into three parts. Firstly, teachers were expected to use mixed languages as the classroom language of instruction. Secondly, students expected teachers to possess sufficient level of English proficiency since this will potentially help students to have a better level of communication. Third, students are expected to have both native-speaking teachers and local teachers as a model of their communication. This study implicates teachers with high English proficiency are supposed to be vigilant to apply it across different settings and situations. This behavior hopefully leads to the felicitous decision of the classroom communication types.

**Keywords:** EFL Indonesia, English proficiency, student expectations, tertiary level

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## Introduction

EFL contexts are unique in many ways, especially in Indonesia, where English had no wide use. It is also not used as a medium of communication in official domains like the government, the law courts, and the educational system. However, English is compulsory in Indonesia at all schooling levels. Therefore, its role was defined primarily through a conscious process through language planning and policy (Lauder, 2009). Due to that, there were several considerations worth discussing on teachers' use of English and their level of proficiency. Several questions like which English proficiency level should teachers possess? Do teachers' cohorts need particular types of English in order to carry out the teaching tasks?

One of the most commonly heard complaints is the low communication competence of English teachers. Gultom (2013) reported that results from competency exams show that the quality of teachers in Indonesia is still low. The average score of teacher competency tests taken in 2012 was 47.84, while the passing score required is 65. As Jalal et al. (2009) study claims, good teachers can produce good quality students. Accordingly, a poor teacher can contribute to poor students' English communication performance.

Research about the perceived importance of communication skills and their predictive value for academic performance was conducted by Palos & Petrovici (2014). The sample included 19 male students and 71 female students. Each participant filled out four questionnaires. The results showed that the students saw communication competence as an essential teaching activity. The level of involvement in interpersonal relationships with teachers shown by the communication occurrence was the premise to achieve academic performance in the future.

In the last two decades, an analysis of students' expectations has been prominent (Addison, Best, & Warrington, 2006; Ferreira & Santoso, 2008). Also, recognizing students' expectations as they first enrolled in a university helped educators boost their students' academic performances. As students continue their university education, they turn out to possess ample learning experiences, which teachers should acknowledge.

The study about students' expectations of their teachers' communication competence was critical since students have invested their money and time to learn English and deserve to get their investment back. Students' view of their teachers' communication competence should be strongly considered since students were the first people who directly got either positive or negative impact of teachers' behaviors and competencies. The study required assessing their perceptions, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) reported an influence of expectation on perception and showed the possibility of combining them to determine students' responses to teachers' behaviors. Moreover, students' past experiences in the classroom contribute to knowledge and further influence expectations. Without knowing students' expectations and concerns, communication development challenges remain unexplored. Therefore, this study aims to examine students' expectations regarding teachers' English proficiency level at Muhammadiyah Malang University (UMM), Indonesia. The research questions were formulated as follows: (1) what are students' expectations of teachers' communication competence?

### Review of Related Literature

In this review of the related literature, the term English level of competence will be used interchangeably with English proficiency level. The concepts of proficiency are various among scholars and educators. For example, Bachman (1990) perceived proficiency from a social dimension, as sociolinguistics discourse is utilized when assessing efficiency. Shen (2013) also defined *proficiency* as teachers' capacity to produce the language effortlessly, utter spoken linguistic accurately, deliver the ideas efficiently, and present speech instantly without problems. Also, it has been discovered that teachers' proficiency includes instructing, providing feedback, asking questions, and presenting the teaching materials effectively and smoothly through the use of the target language (Abduh & Zainuddin, 2016). Other scholars defined proficiency as the types of English the teachers are capable of. For example, teachers with English academics are considered to have high proficiency compared to those that are only capable of using the language daily (e.g., Cummins, 1979). Mahboob (2018) discovered that teachers close to native speakers' proficiency, e.g., pronunciation and accent, were considered to possess a high English proficiency compared to those whose local attributes were distinct.

Scholars vary in their concepts of proficiency, and they also have multiple dimensions and methods when assessing teachers' proficiency — some measure by looking at a particular aspect, such as pronunciation. Concerning pronunciation, Harmer (2001) confirmed that effective interaction was assured by proper articulation. Also, Bennett (2007) noted that teachers should speak correctly to demonstrate that their language was understandable by the learners. Sulistiyo (2016) also released a report on the teaching skills of the EFL in Indonesia. The project's objective was to update information on the English teaching skills of Indonesian EFL teachers. Several publications between 1990 and 2014 were further reviewed, and the study discovered that a high percentage of Indonesian teachers had low self-esteem in using English as the target language in classroom interactions due to the lack of proper pronunciation. This was caused by various accents and dialects of Indonesians, which were not easily changed.

Individuals and agencies have also researched more integrative approaches of measuring teachers' proficiency levels. From individuals' perspectives, Coleman (2009) carried out a report on Indonesian teachers' communication abilities, discovering that more than half of them only had a degree of 'novice' in English, as 45% had a "primary" or "intermediate" level. Also, only 0.7% of teachers were further observed to have working professional English, 0.2% possessed very excellent level.

Sulistiyo (2016) and Yulia (2013) demonstrate that teachers' low English proficiency will likely impact graduates' employability. For example, some employers expressed dissatisfaction as graduates have trouble getting their ideas across in English. Furthermore, Jalal et al. (2009) stated that English was an internationally accepted medium of communication, which is vital for the young generation to adapt. Also, Palos and Petrovici (2014) examined the communicative competence level and their predictive importance for academic achievement. The results showed that communicative ability was a core element of learning for most students.

Additionally, one of the world's largest survey agency the English Proficiency Index (EPI), released a report in 2018, which stated that Indonesian teachers' proficiency was below other Asian countries, as it was ranked 51st among eighty-eight countries. It was farther behind

Singapore in the third position, the Philippines in 14th, Malaysia in 22nd, and Vietnam in 41st. The skills and components used as the survey indicators included listening and reading competencies, grammatical structure, vocabulary mastery, and communication abilities. It was also hypothesized that these indicators were interrelated, such as when the reading comprehension and vocabulary were low, the level of proficiency was low, respectively (Sundari, 2017; Syamsinar & Jabu, 2015). These ended up becoming an alarming concern for English teachers in Indonesia, as the EPI records over the past seven years (2011 and 2018) were also following other results of the agency's polling (OECD 2019; World Bank, 2018; UNESCO, 2012).

Furthermore, others still determined the teachers' level of proficiency through the use of the native speakers' benchmarks. These were observed from the most widespread international tests, developed by people from the "inner circle" of English users, such as IELTS, TOEFL, and CEFR (Renandya, Hamied, & Nurkamto, 2018). The test takers that obtained higher band overall in IELTS achieved a level of C1/C2 CEFR, or above 600 in TOEFL, respectively, were thought to have high English proficiency or considered near-native, even though this level did not guarantee the users to succeed in their higher education and job pursue.

Still, many studies examined the teachers' proficiency level from their self-assessment (Richards, 2017; Andrade & Brown, 2016; Jensen, Denver, Mees, & Werther, 2011; Gardner, 2000; Ross, 1998; Blanche, 1990; Oscarson, 1989). For example, a study by Chacón (2005), cited in Richards (2017), that teachers expressed,

A positive relationship between perceived level of language proficiency and sense of self-efficacy. The higher the teachers' perceived proficiency in language skills, the more efficacious they become. Moreover, the higher the teachers' sense of self-efficacy, the more tendency they had to use communicative-based strategies in their classes, with the inclination to focus more on meaning than accuracy" ( p. 5)

Especially in Indonesia, students learn English for various reasons and with greater variety levels of English ability (Poedjiastutie, Amrin, & Setiawan, 2018). For example, many students enrolled at the Department of English due to their parents' choices (Aryani & Umar, 2020; Proboyo & Soedarsono, 2015; Kusumawati, Yanamandram, & Perera, 2010). However, students are rarely asked about their expectations of teachers' English Proficiency level due to their (students) supposed incapability and irrelevance in assessing the tutors. For example, many educators raised questions like "Why should students be asked to assess teachers' level of English proficiency? and do they have the ability to judge this?".

## Research Methods

This study utilized an interpretive approach that explained the subjective reasons and meanings underlying social actions. According to Reeves & Hedberg (2003), this approach comprehended the world from specific individuals' standpoints and experiences. Focus group discussion (FGD), a form of an in-depth interview to gather the data (Freitas, Oliveira, Jenkins, & Popjoy, 1998), was employed. The FGD led to rich data because participants interacted at the same time about the topic being raised. The Second year English Department students were invited to participate since they were considered capable of delivering opinions regarding the teachers' level of proficiency. They also have completed some subjects related to

communication, such as Sociolinguistics, Cross-Cultural Understanding, Discourse Analysis, Speaking for Informal and Formal Discourse, and Speaking for Academic Purposes. There were five classes of the second-year English Department at UMM. The researcher invited three highest students, three medium students, two lowest students based on their GPA (Grade Point Average) in semester three. They were invited to attend Focus Group Discussions (FGD). These students' opinions during the FGD give the researchers insight in constructing the questionnaires. Convenient sampling was utilized for the questionnaire purposes. The researcher further used a video camera to record all activities during FGD as it eased the data collection process. The FGDs were stopped three times, as the data saturation was achieved. According to Carlsen & Glenton (2011), saturation happens when the same information repeatedly emerges from different participants. The saturation point marked the end of the data collection process. Additionally, questionnaires were also utilized to triangulate the data derived from the FGD, as they were distributed to the second-year students who did not attend the discussion process. The development of the survey questions was also based on the emergence themes derived from the FGDs. The questionnaires were in the form of open-ended questions, as the study topics and objectives were introduced, with the research confidentiality also being explained to respondents. The participants did not need to write down their names to reassure them to deliver honest answers. The data collection procedures are framed in the Figure1 . . ,

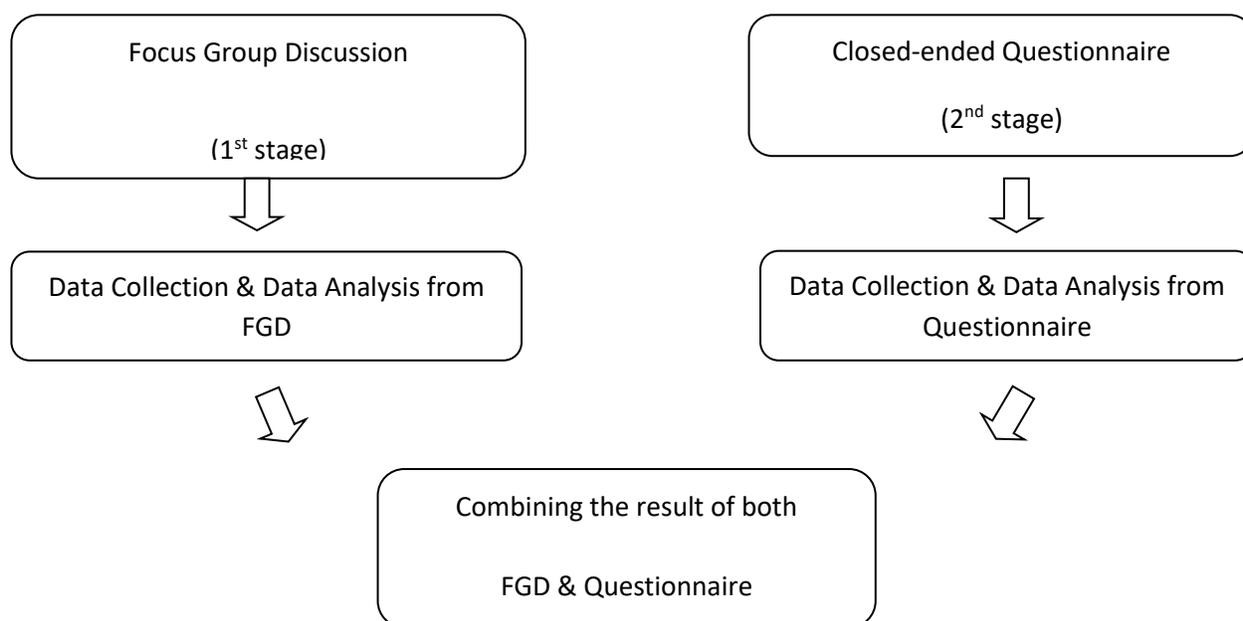


Figure 1. The data collection procedures

The data was analyzed using an interpretive approach, as Bogdan and Biklen (2007) underlined that this method involved working with data by managing and breaking it into manageable pieces, coding, synthesizing the information, and discovering emerging themes.

Most trustworthiness aspects were addressed in two ways, namely credibility and conformability. Moreover, credibility relates to the truth of the discoveries (Ary, Jacobs, & Sorensen, 2010). Data credibility was enhanced since this study applied two data collection

devices (focus group discussion and questionnaire). Furthermore, conformability is a strategy to evade subjectivity during data collection procedures through data tracking (Bryman, 2012). This research also used a video recorder to confirm and track the sources of opinions, using peer-debriefing. Also, the transcripts from FGD were provided back to the participants to validate that their statements were correct and accurate.

The demographic information of participants in this FGD are described below. Most of the participants were within the age range between 19 and 21 years old. Participants who took part in the FGD came from all of the ESP Speaking classes at the English Department (ED). There were twelve female and ten male FGD participants for three times FGDs. Each FGD consisted of seven participants. Meanwhile, participants for the open-ended questionnaire were ED students who did not participate in the FGD. There were 11 female and 8 male participants in the age range between 19 and 21 years old filling out the open-ended questionnaire.

### The Results

Regarding the teachers' proficiency, students' expectations fell into three parts:

- The language of instruction in English classroom.
- The students wanted teachers' English proficiency to enable them to have a better level of communication.
- Students also expressed their preferences of native teachers as their English communication models.
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#### *The students' expectations of the language of instruction in English classrooms*

Students expected that the teachers at ED UMM should use mixed languages- Indonesian and English- to understand the lessons better. This is due to the students' variety level of English proficiency. The university admission system affected the teaching of English as some students, not at the university entry-level were accepted, and had to learn together with the proficient ones. As the admission system and policy were not within the teachers' authority, teachers needed to adjust students' diverse proficiency through mixed languages for classroom instructions.

During the FGD, students admitted that many were not at the basic English level, even though they had decided to study English as their major. The following excerpt was from the students: *I am worried that when the lecturers explain materials in full English, I will likely end up misunderstanding them.*

This thought was also supported by the result of the open-ended questionnaire, which stated that: *I believe teachers need to use mixed language, as it is easier for us to understand what they say since we all have various proficiency levels.*

Other students described the materials' clarity as more critical than the teachers' English proficiency. It was further expected that the instruction and explanation of the materials should be clearly understood. During the teaching and learning process, the students rated clarity more important than fluency; therefore, they expected the teachers to shuttle between English and Indonesian. This sentiment was obtained from the FGD: *I consider fluency number two. The most critical point is that the teachers need to know how to teach to get us interested in the lessons.*

However, two students claimed that teachers should not use Indonesian excessively since it potentially demotivates students. Instead of overusing Indonesian, these students were suggested to employ different learning strategies, such as dictionaries and internet use, to understand the teacher's explanation. From the total 19 survey participants, the questionnaire data showed that three students did not encounter problems when their teachers spoke in full English during the lesson. However, 16 of them expected their teachers to use mixed languages.

Table 1. *Reasons for using mixed languages in English classrooms*

Students' Expectations	Reasons
<b>Teachers are supposed to use the mixed languages</b>	Students' level of proficiency was of the greater variety. Therefore, material clarity is far more important than fluency.
	Students felt anxious when they were unable to elaborate their opinions in full English.
	Students liked the relaxed atmosphere created by teachers, such as using jokes and analogies in a language they understand.
	Indonesian students are basically multilingual in nature

### ***The students' expectations of communicative development***

Teachers' ability to deliver English lessons helps students improve their English to a higher level. Regarding communication, students mentioned that the two most important aspects need improving: the use a variety vocabulary and English fluency. Vocabulary development is substantial for effective language learning and plays an essential part in advancing oral communication. In the FGD, some participants indicated that they wanted teachers to broaden the students' vocabulary capacity. They believed that vocabulary richness allows them to be more confident during conversations. They also made valuable suggestions to master some English chunks, collocations, and idioms to make their proficiency better. They also expected teachers always to introduce different and varied vocabularies in every course meeting to expand their vocabulary. The language learners could not put any structures and functions comprehensively learned into practice, without sufficient vocabulary: *I believe the lecturers should provide us with new vocabularies during every meeting.*

This sentiment was also expressed by 10 out of 19 participants in the questionnaire results: *I wish my lecturers could develop my vocabulary.* Besides, the students expected their teachers to provide more communicational practices, not just grammar. *When we move overseas, foreigners are likely to understand us better when we speak clear in simple English, without much ado about grammar.*

In English communication classes, their roles were significantly crucial to teaching students decent communication while also helping them survive in the workplaces after graduating. Therefore, the teachers were expected to possess a high level of English proficiency. The following excerpt was obtained from the FGD: *Teachers refer to when we doubt specific English phrases and expressions. Teachers with a high level of English potentially prepare us for job competitions*". The questionnaire results supported this opinion, showing that 6 out of 19 students wanted their teachers to provide wider opportunities to improve their oral communication during a classroom activity. One of the students further stated that: *When the communication between teachers and students flows well, the learning process is likely optimized*.

The table below summarizes the students' expectations on the aspects of communication they require for improvement.

Table 2. *The advantageous side of the teachers' high level of English proficiency*

<b>Students' Expectations</b>	<b>Reasons</b>
<b>Teachers' English proficiency enables students improving their communicative competence</b>	Teachers are models of our English communication, e.g., pronunciation, the English expressions, and more.
	In our class, teachers are those we ask and refer to when we doubt certain English phrases, and expressions.
	Teachers with high level of English potentially prepare us for job competitions.

### ***The students' expectations on the language communication models***

From the FGD, the students mentioned their preference for native teachers as the communication model. According to them, foreign teachers had better proficiency than the locals. FGD participants also mentioned that they acquired their English communicational skills considerably better when taught by foreign teachers because they did not allow the students to speak in L1 during the meeting. However, it was not easy to understand them since they often spoke faster. This excerpt was further obtained from the students; *The native lecturers forced us to speak English. Well, I believe it was for our sake to improve our confidence*. However, unlike the locals, foreign teachers do not comprehend the Indonesian students' learning cultures. In contrast, local teachers understand why students were passive in the classrooms and this was due to their similar experiences and challenges when they were studying English.

However, others participants expressed concern to both native and local teachers. Two students said that unlike local teachers, foreign teachers were not familiar with the Indonesian students' learning cultures, despite their high language efficiency. Students feel they have no experience in teaching communication subjects. These teachers provided topics and teaching materials mismatched with students' majors. Some students also questioned teaching appointments for native teachers, as an excerpt obtained from the FGD was as follows: *She gave*

*us speaking topics related to management and economics. I feel like we didn't need these materials.*

In addition, students also expressed concerns about local teachers, as their (teachers) abilities and integrities needed to be scrutinized. Besides that, students opposed grammar, which frustrated and prevented them from practicing communication. The grammar presented by the teacher was not worth focusing too much.

Table 3. *Communication model*

<b>Students' Expectations</b>	<b>Communication model</b>
<b>Native teachers</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. No Indonesian or local language is allowed in the classrooms</li> <li>2. Excellent skills of a subject delivery</li> <li>3. Good models of English (e.g., pronunciation and vocabularies, English expression)</li> </ol>
<b>Local /Non-Native teachers</b>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Understanding the students' lack and limitation of English, while allowing them to speak local language.</li> <li>b. Understanding students' learning cultures</li> <li>c. But focusing on Grammar</li> </ol>

In conclusion, students' expectations of teachers' proficiency were divided into three categories: Due to the students' varying levels of English ability, students anticipated teachers at ED UMM to use a combination of Indonesian and English as the language of instruction in English classes. Second, the ability of teachers to present English classes assisst students in improving their English. Students indicated that the two most essential parts of communication that need to be improved are the use of a variety of vocabulary and becoming more proficient in English. Third, despite the fact that both native English speakers and local teachers have strengths and drawbacks, students prefer native teachers as communication models for a variety of reasons.

**Discussion**

As language was a part of the culture, English teaching and learning should not be separated from understanding society learning with different levels of abilities. It was not surprising that students wanted the teacher to use mixed language instruction in this context. Canagarajah (2011) introduced the term mixed languages as translingual practices. Also, Creese and Blackledge (2010) argued that the capacity of teachers to switch flexibly between native and target languages affects the participation of learners through sufficient and understandable input. In a similar vein, García and Kleyn (2016) declared that translingual practices enabled teachers

to generally learn the target language, increased learners' linguistic vocabulary, assisted in bilingualism, and understood the dialect learned to meet the level of students. Additionally, Medgyes (2006) claimed that most English teachers in Indonesia were non-native speakers and described them as individuals observing the language from a foreign viewpoint.

From the open-ended questionnaire, students mentioned a variety of reasons for the teachers should use mixed language for the classroom instructions. Students felt anxious when they could not elaborate their opinions in full English. Students liked the relaxed atmosphere created by teachers, such as using jokes and analogies in a language they understand. Indonesian students are basically multilingual in nature. In other words, the high level of teachers' English proficiency may become a source of threat if the teachers overlooked students' characteristics. Many studies have demonstrated that this practice is seemingly difficult to avoid. In a similar vein, Poedjiastutie, Rohmah, & Rahagia (2020) mentioned a variety of reasons of utilizing translanguaging practices: the social bonding, comprehensible input, language transfer, linguistic diversity and non-native teachers of Indonesian.

In the second expectation from the students, teachers' English proficiency should enable them to improve their communicative competence. Students indicated that the two most essential parts of communication that need to be strengthened are using various vocabulary and becoming more proficient in English. This finding has similarity to the study of Schmitt (2008) who acclaimed that vocabulary capacity is essential indication for language proficiency. Similarly, learning any foreign language is fundamentally associated with vocabulary knowledge that the learners possessed. Thus, the shortage of vocabulary items obstructs the process of second language learning. In addition, Adam (2016) lack of vocabulary knowledge hinders the real communication of EFL learners to a great extent. Hence, it is predictable that undergraduate EFL learners should have the appropriate vocabulary knowledge.

The results of the open-ended questionnaire support the FGD that students highly proficient teachers will bring students to the higher level of the communication skills and can become a model of students' English communication, e.g., pronunciation and English expressions since proficient teachers is the persons that students ask and refer to when they hesitate specific English phrases and expressions. In addition, teachers with a high level of English potentially prepare students for job and academic competitions. These expectations show that the high level of teachers' English proficiency may have greater potential to assist the good students in developing their English to the upper level. However, some factors have to be taken into consideration, such as students' willingness/unwillingness to communicate (Liu & Jackson, 2008); authentic setting and context for communication to happen (Bailey & Huang, 2011), students' needs of English learning (Poedjiastutie et al., 2018).

The third expectation shows a little contradictory result. Despite mixed languages supposedly being used for the classroom instructions, students mentioned their preference for Native English Speaker Teachers (NESTs) as their linguistic communication model. Students expected teachers to match their level of the language in classroom interactions. This hypothesis is accordance to Ahmad & Jusoff study (2009). They found that teachers' code-switching was an effective teaching strategy when dealing with low proficiency learners. However, more proficient learners of English expect different classroom teaching behaviors. Therefore, when

local teachers cannot satisfy these highly proficient English learners with a sophisticated communication model, they expect to have NESTs as their examples of communication. Some students further stated that they significantly acquired English communication skills with native teachers because speaking in local languages was not allowed during the class.

Proficient learners also expected more opportunities to get full development of their English. In order to mediate the long debate on the required English communication level that should be possessed by EFL teachers, Firth & Wagner (1997) argued that tutors in EFL contexts already had their first language. Therefore, instead of using a monolingual competence benchmark, the English proficiency level's result should refer to the multilingual criterion. Also, it was not realistic to require learners to acquire native speakers like pronunciation, and not plausible to expect them to spend much time pursuing this unattainable and irrelevant goal.

Moreover, the follow-up study needs to be carried to discover the specific types of the language (e.g., daily, specific purpose, or academic English), with the level of proficiency needed by the teachers to successfully execute the teaching tasks for Indonesian EFL learners. Furthermore, many research results (Hakim, 2015; Zlatić, Bjekić, Marinković, & Bojović, 2014; Suciú & Mata, 2011; Sprague, 1993) showed that proficiency level was not only capability that teachers must embrace when carrying out the teaching duty. Pedagogical, personal, and professional competencies were other dimensions that needed consideration. For example, EFL teachers with low and intermediate students did not need to deliver the instructions in full English, as tutors were expected to focus on a specific proficiency type that serves their immediate classroom needs (e.g., Freeman, 2017; Richards, 2017). Teachers with high English proficiency are supposed to be vigilant to apply it across different settings and situations while also understanding students' situations, which leads to the felicitous decision of the classroom communication behavior.

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