

# Teacher Readiness for TEFL in the Non-Formal Education in Thailand

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## ABSTRACT

Teaching English as a foreign language effectively in schools has its own difficulties. A great body of research has proven that different factors are involved in these problems. Yet, teaching English for Non-Formal Education (NFE) students is even more challenging as these students are out-of-school children, adolescents and adults who have their own crucial features as they do not belong to the same age group. Most of them are in employment, so they participate on a voluntary basis. Therefore, teaching English effectively for NFE students focuses not only on practicing basic knowledge and skills for communication but also giving them positive attitudes towards English language learning and the tools for further language skills development. To shed light on the effective English language teaching characteristics, many studies emphasize the study of teacher cognition based on the notion that effective learning is strongly related to teacher beliefs and effective teaching. This study investigated NFE teachers' perceptions towards the effective English language teacher characteristics (Dincer et. al, 2013). 109 NFE teachers participated in the English proficiency test and 2 NFE teachers were interviewed by using an open-ended interview protocol to explore their perceptions towards the effective English language teacher characteristics. Findings reveal that NFE teachers perceived that "subject-matter knowledge" and "pedagogical knowledge" are important for being effective English language teachers. However, the NFE teachers should also have the 'personality characteristics' and "socio-affective skills' as these two aspects are considered crucial for motivating the out-of-school students to be actively involved in the learning process.

**Keywords:** teacher cognition; effective English language teacher; subject matter knowledge; pedagogical knowledge; teacher characteristics

## Introduction

Education systems in Thailand are classified into three main types; formal education, non-formal education and informal education. Non-formal education (NFE) and informal education specifically in Thailand, are perceived as continuous and life-long learning for the out-of-school population who haven't attained to the formal education in regular elementary, secondary and higher education programs. The Basic Education Core Curriculum B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008) (Ministry of Education, 2008) emphasizes the importance of these two types of education and defines them as:

“non-formal education means educational activities which have clear target groups of service users and educational objectives, forms, curricula, methods of provision and course of training durations which are flexible and diverse according to the needs and learning aptitudes of such target groups, and standard procedures of assessments and evaluations of educational performance for the benefit of granting educational credentials or classification of educational performances.”

“informal education means educational activities in the daily lifestyle of a person through which a person may choose to continue learning throughout his/her lifetime pursuant to the interests, needs, opportunities, preparedness and learning aptitude of each persons.”

These two systems of education are integrated and are under the supervision of the Office of Non-formal and Informal Education (ONIE), Ministry of Education. ONIE offers services to a variety of the target groups through traditional methods of learning and teaching as well as through the technology resources and platforms such as e-learning via the Internet, e-Book and e-Library. The optimal goals of the non-formal and informal education are not only to increase students' literacy at primary levels but also providing various types of secondary and post-secondary education including vocational levels (Ministry of Education, 2008).

As seen from its responsibilities, ONIE takes a significant role in the Thai education system as evidence from the number of the students. The National Statistics Office of Thailand reported that approximately 3.4 million students enrolled in the NFE programs in 2016 while close to 10.8 million students registered in the formal elementary and secondary education programs. (Michael, 2018) From the total of 3.4 million students, almost 1.6 million students were in the primary education known as the “Functional Literacy Program” and the lower secondary and upper secondary levels or the “Secondary Continuing Literacy Education Programs”. In these three compulsory literacy programs, students are allowed to equate and transfer their credits to the formal sector education for their further educations or future careers. To do this, students are required to take the examinations known as Non-formal National Education Test (N-NET) conducted by the National Institute of Educational Testing Service in the nine subjects including mathematics, social studies and languages after completing those courses in each semester. Various activities ranging from traditional to more analytical tasks are

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arranged to prepare students with the cognitive knowledge and real-world experiences for their examinations.

Regarding the current government's policy namely "Thailand 4.0" which is a new economic model targeted at promoting high technology smart farming, smart enterprises and high value services, NFE teachers play an important role in developing highly skilled and competent out-of school citizens who are expected to be able to communicate effectively by using a foreign language, particularly English, for the transformation of the country. As the ability to use English proficiently has become a necessity, knowing the language is critical for reaching the most updated knowledge and technology as well as for communicating with people of different mother tongues as a lingua-franca for all purposes. Also, all of the NFE students in the literacy programs are required to learn to communicate in either English or the other foreign language which is Chinese.

Teaching English for NFE Literacy Program students in the EFL context of Thailand is very challenging since most of the students in these programs are young children and adolescents who withdrew from school for a variety of reasons such as people who missed or lack opportunities to access formal schooling system and those who are school-age children and youth in the remote areas where formal schools are not provided. Teaching English for these students does not focus merely on providing them the opportunities to practice basic English knowledge and skills for communication but also giving them the positive attitudes towards English language learning and the tools for further language skills development.

Various research studies were carried out to seek the factors that influenced effective English language learning and teaching. Among them, the effectiveness of English language teachers seemed to be one of the potential components that contributed to the success or failure of the learning process. Richards (2003) explained that effective English language teachers should provide quality instruction and the kind of support which students need to achieve their English language learning. Recently, a great body of research studies has been carried out to define the qualities of the effective English language teachers (e.g. Borg, 2006; Park & Lee, 2006; Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009; Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011). The characteristics of effective English language teachers, according to Dincer (Dincer et. al., 2013), consist of four main features, namely: socio-affective skills, pedagogical knowledge, subject-matter knowledge, and personality characteristics.

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The first, “socio-affective” refers to teachers’ abilities to interact with their students and maintain the educational process effectively. These abilities include a wide range of items such as motivating students, sparing time for helping students, being enthusiastic for teaching, having positive attitudes towards students, responding to students’ needs and providing a relaxed atmosphere in class. The second feature is “pedagogical knowledge” which means what teachers know about teaching their subjects or the knowledge of how to teach e.g. the ability to organize, explain and clarify the subject matter; sustaining students’ interest; and guiding students with informative feedbacks for their error correction. The next feature is called “subject-matter knowledge” which refers to what teachers know about what they teach; in other words, the mastery of the subject to teach including the use of subject matter knowledge in different phases of the educational process such as using target language effectively in the classroom. The last feature is “personal characteristics” which refers to the teachers’ essential personal characteristics to teach effectively and to be successful in their profession; for example, being challenging, having reasonably high expectations, having a sense of humor and being enthusiastic and creative. These qualities will create trusting relationships with their students.

Since English is seen as a vital tool for the development of our country, English language learning and teaching are considered necessary for NFE students. Undoubtedly ONIE and NFE teachers are confronted with a lot of difficulties in providing students with the learning experiences in order to achieve the learning objectives: possessing basic English knowledge and skills for communication, having positive attitudes towards English language learning and being able to develop and further their skills autonomously. To meet these requirements, NFE teachers are supposed to have the characteristics of effective English language teachers to ensure that their students will have positive learning outcomes since teachers’ quality is a crucial factor in fostering effective learning. Therefore, it would be truly beneficial to explore the NFE teachers’ perception towards the characteristics of effective English teachers and their English proficiencies. The results from this study will help NFE teachers understand their own potential for teaching this group of students and will help ONIE support its teachers so that they are able to develop themselves accordingly.

## **Research Objectives**

This study investigated NFE teachers’ proficiencies in English, their perceptions towards their pedagogical knowledge of English language teaching and the characteristics of the effective English language teachers.

## Research questions

1. What are the NFE teachers' English proficiencies?
2. How do the NFE teachers perceive their own pedagogical knowledge of English language teaching?
3. What are the NFE teachers' opinions towards the characteristics of the effective English language teachers teaching NFE students?

## Data Collection

Participants in this study constituted two groups. The first group was 109 NFE teachers who attended a 12-day workshop for developing their English proficiency and pedagogical knowledge of English language teaching. A test adapted from a standard academic English proficiency test was administered for assessing NFE teachers' listening, reading and writing abilities before and after the training. At the end of the training, the teachers were required to complete the open-ended questionnaire about their perceptions towards their pedagogical knowledge of English language teaching. Then, each individual teacher was interviewed by English native teachers who were IELTS testers in order to assess their speaking ability before and after the training. After the training, two teachers were randomly selected for an in-depth interview about their perceptions towards the characteristics of the effective English language teachers teaching NFE students.

## Findings

In order to present the NFE teachers' English proficiencies, percentage and arithmetic mean scores were employed to describe the teachers' overall proficiency in English. To identify the NFE teachers' perceptions towards their pedagogical knowledge of English language teaching and their perception towards the characteristics of the effective English language teachers teaching NFE students, the results from the open-ended questionnaire and the interview scripts were analyzed and summarized by means of content analysis.

## NFE teachers' English proficiencies

Table 1 below demonstrates the NFE teachers' English language proficiencies in four skills before they attended the 12-day workshop.

**Table 1: NFE teachers' English language proficiencies in four skills**

Range of scores	Numbers
1-10	1
11-20	1
21-30	21
31-40	38
41-50	36
51-60	8
61-70	2
71-80	2
81-90	0
90-100	0
	109

The overall mean score of the NFE's English proficiency in four skills namely listening, speaking, reading and writing before the training was at a low level of 39.23%. The lowest score was 8% and the highest was 78%. In addition, 97 teachers or 88.99% scored lower than 50%. From the scores illustrated above, it can be concluded that NFE's English proficiency was rather low.

## **NFE teachers' perception towards their own pedagogical knowledge of English language teaching**

The results from the open-ended questionnaire indicated that most of the NFE teachers revealed that apart from the good knowledge of the language, pedagogy characterized an effective English language teacher. They also admitted that they did not have enough ability in designing the English lessons that were appropriate for NFE students. Mastery in English language was important but knowing the language was different from knowing how to prepare the lessons that facilitated the learners to achieve their learning outcomes; particularly for the NFE students who possessed unique characteristics.

Most of their students lacked motivation in learning in every subject, not to mention English which was not the language used in everyday life. Many of the NFE teachers added that providing interesting activities which aroused the students' attention and motivation led to students' learning and was considered as one of the most important characteristics in this category. They said that constructing the lessons that were tailored to students' proficiency levels, their learning styles and interests were not without problems.

In addition, most of the NFE teachers agreed that they had the knowledge of how to teach in order to deal with the affective domain; however, they pointed out that they were also supposed to motivate their students how to learn English outside the classroom as the students did not regularly attend class for a variety of reasons. Therefore, the teachers' ability to encourage their students to improve their English ability while they were not in the classroom was a necessary characteristic of the NFE teachers.

## **NFE teachers' perceptions towards the characteristics of the effective English language teacher teaching NFE students**

### *Subject-matter knowledge*

Generally, the characteristics of the out-of-school NFE students are very different from those in formal education. This might be a reason to make us think that the NFE teachers were supposed to portray their different opinions towards the characteristics of the effective language teachers from many of the teachers in the mainstream education reported by various studies. From the interviews, the first priority for both of the NFE teachers was the mastery command of the subject-matter e.g. mastering of speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar. They also mentioned the adequate knowledge of culture of the people speaking English as their mother tongue since knowing a language was not simply knowing how to communicate effectively but knowing the cultures which were different from ours. They

believed that teachers were the important source who transmitted the knowledge of culture to their students.

Interestingly, one of the teachers reported that speaking with accurate pronunciation was necessary but having a native accent was not considered very important as long as the accurate articulation was maintained since the main purpose of teaching English was to make NFE students be able to communicate successfully in their real lives. To her, what was more important was the English knowledge that influenced the teachers' ability in designing accurate and appropriate lessons.

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With high English proficiency, the teacher would feel more confident and look more reliable in the students' perception. Without it, the students might not trust their teachers and would not get the accurate knowledge. She also added that the English teachers were not necessarily taught English in English as the NFE students' level of proficiency was quite low. They might not understand the lessons and lost their interest in learning if their teachers kept delivering the lessons in a way that they could not understand.

The other teacher was responsible for giving the lessons to NFE students in several subjects as well as teaching tutorial English for N-NET exams and mastering the academic English knowledge and English for everyday use which were a demand and requirement. She pointed out that linguistic knowledge helped teachers create their own self-confidence and trustworthiness. Therefore, she had high attachment to English proficiency rather than the other three characteristics.

*The other characteristics: pedagogical knowledge, personality, and socio-affective*

Pedagogical knowledge is seen as the teachers' ability in effectively planning for instruction and facilitating learners to acquire the knowledge and skills successfully. The data from the interview scripts shows that the two participants denoted different perspectives towards the rest of the characteristics. The first teacher thought that these characteristics were in a linear order but the other perceived them as the inter-related factors. The former participant suggested that without teachers' pedagogy knowledge, NFE students were not be able to learn successfully. It was the skill that supported the subject-matter to work more efficiently. She explained that normally the NFE students disliked the traditional learning method of using a textbook and their intention to learn was very low. NFE teachers needed to design the tasks and activities which would trigger their students' motivation and deliver them carefully by taking in to consideration the students' emotional state of mind. With their responsibilities in their daily lives e.g. earning money for their families, they were likely to easily give up studying. Hence, NFE students needed frequent encouragement and teachers were supposed to constantly maintain a positive learning environment. She added that she was not only a teacher but a life coach. With this scenario, the teachers' socio-effective ability came into play. For her, the last characteristic or teachers' personality was also important for the students' learning process. She mentioned dressing appropriately as an example. Being properly dressed could create a teachers' credibility in the NFE students' opinion. Appropriateness in her context meant being not too casual nor too formal. If it was too formal, this would create a huge gap between teachers and students. In contrast, with too casual an attire, it was seen as unprofessional and would cause a disrespectful

attitude among the students. To dress appropriately was considered to be a good model for NFE students whose behaviors, but not all, were considered unfavorable.

For the latter, pedagogical knowledge, personality, and socio-affective skills did not come in sequences but there was an interaction among the factors. Being an NFE teacher, she experienced that more than 80% of NFE students did not like studying English. Moreover, she observed that most of the out-of-school NFE students had no confidence to speak English and they left schools because of their own discipline problems rather than financial problems. The effective NFE teachers needed special abilities to call for the students' attention to learn the lessons. In order to grasp their attention, teachers might have to demonstrate the personal characteristics and socio-affective skills that made students conform to their requirement. These ranged from dressing properly, having a sense of humor, being enthusiastic and creative, being challenging, being tolerant and open-minded, having positive attitudes toward unusual ideas, caring for students so on and so forth. In conclusion, she proposed that the integration of the three characteristics, pedagogical, socio-effective and personal characteristics, were necessary for being an effective NFE teacher teaching English for the NFE students.

## Discussion

### The English proficiencies of NFE teachers

NFE teachers consisted of teachers at Community Learning Centers, the permanent employed teachers working at grass-root level and teachers who are government officers. These teachers are required to hold at least a bachelor's degree in any of the disciplines. Yet; they are supposed to teach nine subjects including Computer Use, Mathematics in Daily Life, SME Business Administration, Democracy, Community Administration and Management, Thai for Communication, Community Research, Food Management for Family and Community and English or Chinese Conversation. In addition to this, the teachers are also responsible; at least, for the students in 3 programs which are composed of Functional Literacy Program students, lower secondary and upper secondary levels students in Secondary Continuing Literacy Education Programs.

NFE students in these 3 compulsory literacy programs are required to pass the N-Net examinations. Also, the issue to promote Thai people's English proficiency including the NFE students' is an important part of fostering the Thailand 4.0 scheme initiated by the current Thai government. To achieve this, it is necessary to develop NFE teachers to be effective English language teachers. One of the most important characteristics of the effective English teacher is the "subject-matter knowledge", mastery of English linguistic and culture including the use of English in different phases of the educational process in the classroom. However, NFE teachers were not being prepared well enough for being effective English language teachers as seen from their education. It was reported in this study that only 21 teachers accounted for 19.27% attained their bachelor's degree in English. In addition, the result from this study also revealed that NFE teachers' English proficiency was quite low. Continuing professional development to accelerate the teachers' English proficiency is an urgent task that ONIE should arrange for its teachers,

particularly for those in the rural areas so that they will have more confidence and be ready for the development of their NFE students' English ability.

## **NFE teachers' pedagogical knowledge**

Pedagogical knowledge in English language teaching is referred to as the teacher's knowledge of how to present the English knowledge and skills to facilitate learners in their learning process. It includes the awareness of the procedures and the strategies to follow in the learning process. Mastery of the English language and teaching English language are not the same; therefore, NFE English language teachers should not only know the language proficiently but know how to deliver it to their learners successfully. As mentioned earlier, only 19.27% of the NFE teachers who attended the workshop for boosting the teachers to teach English effectively graduated with a bachelor's degree in English. Half of the English major teachers held education certificates while the other half only had the degree in English language. This is why most of the teachers in the training program admitted that they did not have enough pedagogical knowledge in order to design the English lessons that were appropriate for their unique NFE students. To ensure that out-of-school NFE students acquire the English knowledge and skills, which is one of the factors for the 21st century competence learners, and to reduce inequities across the Thai education system, ONIE is supposed to offer the opportunities for its teachers to acquire both English language proficiency and pedagogical knowledge.

## **NFE teachers' perceptions towards the characteristics of the effective English language teacher teaching NFE students**

In provoking effective and efficient English language learning of NFE students', qualified NFE English language teachers are essentially needed since teachers apparently have significant roles not only for facilitating students in the class but in motivating them to learn while they are not in the classroom environment. Obviously, the NFE teachers who provided the useful information and evidences for this study accepted that their main concern was related to teachers' English linguistic knowledge and culture. This characteristic contributed to the teachers' confidence in constructing the lessons and using the accurate language in class for fostering students' language progression for communication and for exams. However, mastering the English subject matter was not the only factor for being effective and efficient English language teachers who could make real progress in NFE students' language learning. Beyond this characteristic, it is the teachers' ability to conduct pleasant lessons by considering many of the NFE students' limitations and complications whilst performing in class in order to build the right rapport and trust with the students by preserving their steadfast physical manifestation and also emotional appearances which are very much in demand. To them, the socio-affective skill

and personal characteristics were the two qualities which were inhibited in most of the experienced NFE teachers; still, the other two sophisticated forms of knowledge which were subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge were hard to obtain but these would be available to everyone who willingly sought them.

## Conclusion

Within the current two-tier education system in Thailand where formal education students and educators possess more advancement in English language education, non-formal and informal students and teachers lag behind their counterparts. To overcome this obstacle in order to prepare NFE students who retain complicated backgrounds for the rapid changing world, the authorities are suggesting to plan for a strategic approach to teachers' professional development with an emphasis on improving the NFE English language proficiencies and pedagogical knowledge to ensure that all the NFE students are educated in order to achieve high quality and highly qualified NFE teachers.

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