

Ismagulova et.al, 2024

Volume 6, pp. 72-83

Received: 29th September 2023

Revised: 30th November 2023, 01st December 2023

Accepted: 04th December 2023

Date of Publication: 15th March 2024

This paper can be cited as: Ismagulova, A. & Gerfanova, E. & Rakisheva, G. (2024). EFL Schoolteachers' Language Proficiency as a Key Factor in Language Educational Environment. Docens Series in Education, 6, 72-83.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

EFL SCHOOLTEACHERS' LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AS A KEY FACTOR IN THE LANGUAGE EDUCATIONAL ENVIRONMENT

Ainagul Ismagulova

*PhD, Associate Professor, Department of the English Language and Teaching Methods,
Sh.Ualikhanov Kokshetau University, Kokshetau, Kazakhstan*
ainagulism@gmail.com

Elmira Gerfanova

*PhD, Assistant Professor, Department of General Education Disciplines, Astana IT University,
Astana, Kazakhstan*
elmira.gerfanova@astanait.edu.kz

Gulmira Rakisheva

*PhD, Associate Professor, Department of Pedagogy and Psychology,
Sh.Ualikhanov Kokshetau University, Kokshetau, Kazakhstan*
rakisheva.g.2020@gmail.com

Abstract

This research investigates the significance of schoolteachers' English Language (EFL) proficiency as a crucial factor for developing the language educational environment in Kazakhstan. The study explores the theoretical aspects of the language educational environment. It focuses on the strategies EFL schoolteachers employ to enhance their English language proficiency and their

perceived additional support needs. 525 EFL teachers, including 301 from urban schools and 224 from rural schools, participated in the study. The findings from the questionnaire revealed that urban teachers display a more substantial commitment to consistent language skill enhancement, actively participating in language courses, and engaging in communication with native speakers. In contrast, rural teachers experience language barriers in communicating with native speakers due to limited interaction opportunities. Addressing the diverse needs of EFL schoolteachers holds paramount importance for the effective development of the language educational environment, particularly across rural contexts. The identified support needs emphasize technical assistance, interaction with native speakers, availability of language courses, and access to educational materials. This study contributes valuable insights into language proficiency enhancement strategies and support requirements across urban and rural educational landscapes.

Keywords

EFL Schoolteachers, English Language Proficiency, Language Educational Environment, Urban Schools, Rural Schools

1. Introduction

In an era marked by increasing globalization and cross-cultural interactions, foreign language proficiency has emerged as a critical determinant in various spheres of society. Within this context, the proficiency of English as a Foreign Language schoolteachers holds a particularly significant role in shaping the language educational environment. This study explores the relationship between EFL schoolteachers' language proficiency and the overall language educational environment, with a specific focus on the unique case of Kazakhstan.

A dynamic blend of urban and rural settings characterizes Kazakhstan's educational landscape. The country's educational landscape comprises 7,473 general education institutions, with a substantial majority of 70% (5,261) in rural regions. Notably, 37% of all schools (2753) fall under the classification of small or ungraded schools, which lack the necessary enrollment to allocate individual classrooms to each year group. This results in the instruction of students from different age groups within the same class. 99% (2727) of these small schools are located within rural regions.

Several studies have brought to light disparities in the quality of English language education, specifically within urban and rural schools across the nation. According to the data

derived from the Program for International Student Assessment (OECD, 2019), factors such as the language of instruction (Kazakh or Russian), the geographic location of the school (urban or rural), and the socio-economic factors have a significant impact on student performance. Furthermore, Bridges and Sagintayeva (2014) have identified an insufficiency of qualified educators as one of the principal factors contributing to these discrepancies. Batyrova (2021) investigated the perspectives of rural students concerning their experience with learning English. The collected data revealed that the absence of an English-speaking environment, limited opportunities to practice English in their village, and the inadequate professional competence of English instructors stand out as the primary factors contributing to rural students' poor performance in English. The students characterized their English classes as uninteresting and unchallenging. Furthermore, the participants indicated that their English teachers excessively resort to using the native language during lessons, negatively impacting their English proficiency. These findings align with the research of Karabassova (2020a; 2020b), who explored teachers' readiness for English as a Medium of Instruction. The results from these studies revealed that almost all pre-service teachers (97%) possessed only elementary-level English proficiency (A1-A2), and their language skills did not improve by their final year of study. Additionally, despite having obtained certificates from the Cambridge English Placement Test, educators from rural schools confessed that these certificates did not accurately reflect their actual level of English language proficiency.

The present study aims to conduct a comparative analysis of EFL schoolteachers' self-assessments regarding their English language proficiency. It will help to get insights that can contribute to developing an effective language educational environment. Accordingly, the research concentrates on the following:

- Whether EFL schoolteachers take specialized language courses to enhance their English language proficiency.
- What strategies EFL schoolteachers employ to develop their English language proficiency?
- What additional resources or support EFL schoolteachers require within the school environment to help them enhance their English language proficiency.

2. Literature Review

The concept of a language educational environment is pivotal in foreign language education. Initially, it is essential to define the essence of the educational environment. The environment, as such, is regarded by psychologist Nemov (1995) as a set of external conditions, objects, and factors within which an individual is born, lives, and develops. Following Yasvin (2001), we define the educational environment as a combination of material factors, social components, and interpersonal relationships. According to Panov (2006), the educational environment consists of the following components:

- Material component (equipment, premises, materials);
- Social component (interpersonal interaction among students, educators, parents);
- Activity component (content and teaching methods).

When discussing *language* educational environment, it is important to expand upon the abovementioned components and introduce an additional linguistic one. This linguistic component considers factors influencing language acquisition, usage, and development. Hence, we define a language educational environment as a combination of material resources, social dynamics, intrapersonal relations, and the nuances of language acquisition, usage, and proficiency development. Taking this definition as the basis for this research, it is evident that foreign language instructors play a significant role in creating a favorable language educational environment in which students will be motivated and encouraged to engage in foreign language learning. The proficiency and competence of schoolteachers in the target language hold, thus, profound significance.

Teachers' command of the target language directly influences their ability to create an immersive language environment, effectively communicate language nuances, and inspire students' confidence in their language journey. As emphasized by Medgyes (2001), without language proficiency, the English language instructor relies more heavily on instructional resources and cannot engage in spontaneous and meaningful interactions with students. Teachers' language proficiency level determines the extent to which they employ the target language in the classroom, and a higher level of proficiency broadens their range of potential teaching methods (Berry, 1990). Furthermore, EFL teachers frequently serve as the only linguistic model for students and render the latter the primary source of exposure to the target language (Littlewood & Yu, 2011). The impact of a teacher's proficiency extends beyond his or her ability to utilize the target language within the classroom; it also influences a teacher's confidence in effectively conducting

the class in the target language. The level of proficiency in the target language can either enhance or diminish a teacher's confidence in his or her teaching competence.

3. Research Methods

The study aimed to compare EFL schoolteachers' self-assessments regarding their English language proficiency across urban and rural settings in Kazakhstan. With this intent, a quantitative research method was employed. The research focused on the following research questions:

RQ 1. Do EFL schoolteachers take specialized language courses to enhance their English language proficiency?

RQ 2. What strategies do EFL schoolteachers employ to develop their English language proficiency?

RQ 3. What additional resources or support do EFL schoolteachers require within the school environment to help them enhance their English language proficiency?

The study analyzed data collected from an online questionnaire developed by the authors of the paper. The questionnaire in Kazakh and Russian contained two sections: 1) a section on background information (7 questions) and 2) a section related to EFL schoolteachers' assessment of their English language proficiency, which consisted of 7 questions.

3.1 Participants

The participants of this study comprised 525 EFL teachers, including 301 from urban schools and 224 from rural schools of Kazakhstan. The participants' profiles are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Profiles of Participating Teachers.

	Urban		Rural	
Number of respondents				
	301		224	
Age				
	N	%	N	%
20-29 y.o.	64	21,3	48	21,5
30-39 y.o.	127	42,2	102	45,5
40-49 y.o.	74	24,5	45	20,1
50 and above	36	12	29	12,9
Gender				

Female teachers	293	97,3	215	96
Male teachers	8	2,7	9	4
Years of teaching experience				
0-4 years	62	20,6	46	20,5
5-9 years	61	20,4	57	25,4
10-20 years	113	37,5	81	36,2
20 years and above	65	21,5	40	17,9
Qualification				
Teacher	73	24,3	65	29,2
Teacher-Moderator	90	29,9	66	29,4
Teacher-Expert	74	24,6	57	25,4
Teacher-Researcher	55	18,2	34	15,2
Teacher-Master	10	3,3	2	0,8
Educational Background				
Hei	293		218	
College	8		6	

(Source: Self/Authors' Own Illustration)

When examining the profiles of EFL schoolteachers in urban and rural schools of Kazakhstan, notable differences emerge concerning their teaching experience and professional qualifications. In urban schools, EFL instructors possessing 10 to 20 years of teaching experience and those with over 20 years hold a slightly higher proportion at 37.5% and 21.5%, respectively, in contrast to 36.2% and 17.9% in rural schools. Regarding the qualifications of schoolteachers, it is evident that in urban schools, a more significant proportion of teachers possess higher professional qualifications, particularly those falling under the categories of teachers-researchers and teachers-masters, with 18.2% and 3.3%, respectively. Rural schools exhibit a lower prevalence of these designations, at 15.2% and 0.8%, respectively.

4. Results and Discussion

RQ 1. Do EFL schoolteachers take specialized language courses to enhance their English language proficiency?

To identify whether the EFL schoolteachers take specialized courses, the participants were asked the following questions:

- How often do you take language courses to develop your English language competence?
- Which specific language courses have you completed over the past five years?

As seen from Table 2, urban teachers (19%) are more likely to take English language courses annually than rural teachers (13.4%), indicating a slightly higher inclination toward consistent language skill development in urban areas. Furthermore, urban teachers (8%) have a lower percentage of never taking English courses than rural teachers (16.6%), which may indicate a limited range of language learning opportunities in rural settings.

Table 2. Frequency of Taking English Language Courses (Urban vs Rural).

		Every year	Every three years	Every five years	Never
urban	N	57	148	71	24
	%	19	49,3	23,7	8
rural	N	30	96	61	37
	%	13,4	42,9	27,2	16,6

(Source: Self/Authors' Own Illustration)

The types of specialized English language courses fall under the following categories, as presented in Table 3. Not all the teachers who acknowledged taking English language courses specified the names of these courses. Instead, they provided names for professional development courses, which, generally, are centered on teaching methodology rather than language skill improvement. This difference between the reported frequency of participating in English language courses and the specific course names underscores the need for additional interviews with teachers to gather further insights.

Table 3. Specialized English Language Courses.

Courses	Frequency	
	Urban EFL teachers	Rural EFL teachers
Coursera	53	27
PUDP (Pedagogical University Development Courses)	25	10
Courses offered by "Orleu" national center for professional development	78	83
IELTS preparation courses	15	8
British Council	10	12
CELTA preparation courses	2	0

(Source: Self/Authors' Own Illustration)

The data from Table 4 indicates disparities between urban and rural teachers regarding potential language barriers they experience when communicating with native speakers. Specifically, rural teachers appear more likely to experience a language barrier, with 42% reporting such experiences compared to 32.6% of urban teachers. This difference could be attributed to various factors such as exposure to native speakers, language resources, and opportunities for language practice. Furthermore, a more significant proportion of rural teachers (32.6%) admit never communicating with native speakers, which may indicate limited opportunities for direct interaction.

Table 4. Do You Experience a Language Barrier When Communicating with a Native Speaker?

		Yes	No	Never communicated with native speakers
urban	N	98	150	53
	%	32,6	49,8	17,6
rural	N	94	57	73
	%	42	25,4	32,6

(Source: Self/Authors' Own Illustration)

RQ 2. What strategies do EFL schoolteachers employ to develop their English language proficiency?

Table 5 presents information about the strategies employed by EFL teachers to enhance their English language proficiency. By comparing the data between urban and rural teachers, several insights can be drawn into potential differences in language development approaches.

Table 5. EFL Teachers' Strategies for Enhancing English Language Proficiency.

		Reading books and articles in English	Listening to audio and watching movies in English	Participating in English language courses or training	Communicating with native speakers	Using online applications
urban	N (frequency)	125	215	138	58	202
	%	41,5	71,4	45,8	19,3	67,1
rural	N (frequency)	108	152	93	28	142

	%	48,2	67,9	41,5	12,5	63,4
--	---	------	------	------	------	------

(Source: Self/Authors' Own Illustration)

The most frequently used strategies for enhancing English language proficiency among urban and rural EFL teachers are listening to audio/watching movies in English and using online applications. Reading books and articles in English is slightly more common among rural teachers, potentially indicating their inclination toward text-based resources. Participation in English language courses or training is more prevalent among urban teachers due to better access to such opportunities in urban areas. Furthermore, urban teachers also practice communicating with native speakers more, which could be attributed to more opportunities for intercultural contact in urban settings.

RQ 3. What additional resources or support do EFL schoolteachers require within the school environment to help them enhance their English language proficiency?

The responses to this question were organized into distinct categories, as presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Categories of the Required Additional Support.

Courses	Frequency	
	Urban EFL teachers	Rural EFL teachers
Technical support/ Internet access	105	143
Communication with native speakers	98	127
Language courses	156	112
Additional educational resources	75	139

(Source: Self/Authors' Own Illustration)

The data in Table 6 reveal differences between urban and rural EFL teachers concerning the need for supplementary assistance to enhance their English language proficiency and cultivate an immersive language educational environment. Among rural teachers, technical support emerges as the foremost requirement. Compared to their urban counterparts, rural EFL teachers more frequently express the need for multimedia resources and separate classrooms for English instructors to conduct workshops and seminars. Additionally, the desire for interactions with native speakers aligns with the findings from the questionnaire (Table 4). Given the limited access to native speakers, rural EFL teachers suggest solutions such as inviting English-speaking teachers or volunteers to collaborate within their school settings. Furthermore, rural EFL teachers emphasize the importance of providing them with additional educational resources, including books, audiobooks, video materials, and online resources. Urban and rural EFL schoolteachers

consider it significant for their English language enhancement to access cost-free language courses, including IELTS/ TEFL preparation courses.

5. Conclusion

The investigation into the English language proficiency enhancement and additional support needs of EFL schoolteachers in urban and rural settings has revealed valuable insights. Urban teachers are more inclined toward consistent language skill development, possibly due to increased exposure to language resources and intercultural interactions. They are more likely to engage in English language courses and communicate with native speakers. On the other hand, rural teachers face potential language barriers when communicating with native speakers, which may stem from limited opportunities for direct interaction. The strategies employed by EFL teachers for language development highlight the prevalence of multimedia-based approaches, such as listening to audio and using online applications. Reading remains an important strategy, particularly among rural teachers, whereas urban teachers benefit from increased access to specialized courses. The identified additional support needs underscore the significance of technical assistance, communication with native speakers, access to language courses, and the provision of educational resources. Addressing the diverse needs of EFL schoolteachers is essential for fostering effective language development and creating an immersive language educational environment. Future initiatives should focus on providing equitable opportunities for professional growth, access to resources, and promoting intercultural interactions to enhance English language proficiency among urban and rural educators.

6. Funding

The research work conducted under IRN AP14871729 has been funded by the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

REFERENCES

- Batyrova, A. (2021). *Understanding Kazakhstani Students' Challenges in Speaking English and Their Strategy Use: A Phenomenographic Study*. [Master's Thesis]. Nazarbayev University: Graduate School of Education.
- Berry, R. (1990). The role of language improvement in in-service teacher training: Killing two birds with one stone. *System*, 18 (1), 97–105. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X\(90\)90032-Z](https://doi.org/10.1016/0346-251X(90)90032-Z)
- Bridges, D., & Sagintayeva, A. (2014). Introduction. In D. Bridges (Ed.), *Educational reform and Internationalization: The Case of School Reform in Kazakhstan* (pp.XII-1). Cambridge University Press.
- Karabassova, L. (2020a). Understanding Trilingual Education Reform in Kazakhstan: Why Is It Stalled? In D. Egea (Ed.), *Education, Equity, Economy: Education in Central Asia: A Kaleidoscope of Challenges and Opportunities* (1 ed., Vol. 8, pp. 37-50). Springer Nature. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-50127-3_3
- Karabassova, L. (2020b). *CLIL as part of mainstream education: A grounded theory exploration of secondary school science teachers' experiences*. Nur-Sultan: Kazakhstan Graduate School of Education, Nazarbayev University. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2020.1775781>
- Littlewood, W., & Yu, B. (2011). First language and target language in the foreign language classroom. *Language Teaching*, 44(1), 64–77. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0261444809990310>
- Medgyes, P. (2001). When the teacher is a non-native speaker. In: Celcie-Murcia M. (Ed.) *Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language* (pp.415–427). Boston, MA: Heinle & Heinle.
- Nemov, R.S. (1995). *Psikhologiya. Uchebnik dlya vysshikh pedagogicheskikh uchebnykh zavedeniy*. [Psychology. Textbook for higher pedagogical educational institutions]. Moscow: Vlados.
- OECD (2019). *PISA 2018 Results (Volume I): What Students Know and Can Do*. PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris. <https://doi.org/10.1787/5f07c754-en>

Panov, V.I. (2006). *Psikhodidaktika obrazovatel'nykh sistem*. [Psychodidactics of educational systems. St. Petersburg.

Yasvin, V.A. (2001). *Obrazovatel'naya sreda: ot modelirovaniya k proyektirovaniyu*. [Educational environment: from modeling to design]. Moscow.