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Overview of English language teaching challenges

Furnishing language teachers with preparation and professional development opportunities catering to their needs and challenges is central to quality language education. However, there are many omissions in the literature that need addressing in this respect. This paper aims to provide an overview of the challenges English as a foreign language teachers face. Accordingly, it asks two questions: What influence do perceived challenges exert on language teachers and their instructional practices? What challenges do language teachers encounter, especially given the increased demands for learners' language proficiency? Challenges affect language teachers in multiple ways. This influence is traceable to their choice of instructional procedures, patterns of interaction with learners, communication style, usage of the target language, professional identity, curriculum decisions, well-being, job satisfaction, resilience, etc. The challenges language teachers encounter were described in the paper as externally and internally motivated to the teacher, and as discipline-specific or discipline-independent, inherent to teaching in general. External challenges include expectations of teacher competence and language teacher roles, student- and instruction-related issues (discipline, learner motivation, mixed-ability classes, and instructional management), low social status of the teaching profession, lack of financial incentives and resources, language policy, etc. The internal challenges language teachers face are caused by the personal qualities of teachers and an inadequate level of professional competence. Overall, the issues taken up in the paper could highlight the venues for leveraging language and teacher education.

Key words: *challenges, English as a foreign language, language education, teacher.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Providing preparation and development opportunities sensitized to teachers' needs and challenges is essential for quality language education and the recruitment of competent professionals. Nevertheless, pertinent literature systematically observing English as a foreign language (EFL) teaching challenges is still sparse. To address this omission, the present study provides an overview of the challenges EFL teachers face throughout their careers. In doing so, several questions are asked: What influence do perceived challenges exert on language teachers and on their instructional practices? What challenges do EFL teachers encounter, especially in view of the increased demands for learners' language proficiency? Such insight into the hardships experienced by language teachers could pave the ground for serving them with more evidence-based rather than formalist support.

2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUNDS

A substantial amount of research has addressed the challenges teachers encounter in the general education field. Concomitant research on EFL teaching challenges is far less copious. One of the conspicuous research lines unravels the context-specific EFL teaching challenges. Because language teaching is socially- and contextually-situated, an overriding concern of researchers has become the localized perspective on language teaching challenges [11; 29; 39]. The EFL field is also preoccupied with the investigation of challenges and the support of newly-qualified teachers [21]. Quite a few studies address the issues of escalating expectations of language teacher proficiency [15; 33]. Amid all this diversity of research foci, it is essential to navigate through the findings of EFL teaching challenges and synthesize their implications for language education, which predetermines the r e l e v a n c e of this paper. Accordingly, the study a i m s to review the literature pertinent to the challenges faced by EFL teachers. The o b j e c t of the study is foreign language teaching challenges. The s u b j e c t of the study is the challenges language teachers encounter as described in the relevant literature. To conduct this overview, the Research4Life platform was used, which is a collection of flagship publications that hosts many databases, including the EFL teaching and learning field. The platform was browsed for papers focusing on challenges language teachers encounter.

3. FINDINGS

Conceptualization of challenges faced by EFL teachers

The current movements shaping the field of language teaching and learning are embedded in the sociocultural perspective [20] and critical pedagogy, which foreground research traditions in teacher cognition and language teacher education for social justice [23]. Through a sociocultural lens, challenges are associated with a cognitive-affective domain, intersecting between emotions, beliefs, and attitudes, and are induced by hardships or obstacles. Cognitions relate to what "teachers think, know and believe, and how they relate to what teachers do" [9, p. 128]. In turn, challenges generate an emotional response in teachers and learners. Emotions play a vital role in language teaching and learning, determining the choice of instructional and learning preferences [27; 31]. Emotions as an affective category have been examined recently in terms of their influence on language teachers' social interactions. Even-though emotions are central to our understanding of cognitions, language teacher education literature often slights them. Nguyen pertinently argues that in order to understand teachers as whole persons, it is essential to link their knowledge, beliefs, and thoughts with their feelings or emotions [30, p. 244]. Teaching is described in the academic literature as an emotionally charged activity [31], invoking in teachers and learners various affective reactions due to their involvement in social interactions.

There is little agreement on the nature of challenges in language teaching or how the inferences drawn from research should shape teacher preparation. In general sense, challenges are associated with emotions that enhance any activity, including teaching. According to "APA Dictionary of Psychology" a challenge is "an obstacle appraised as an opportunity rather than a threat. A threat becomes a challenge when the individual judges that his or her coping resources are adequate not only to overcome the stress associated with the obstacle but also to improve the situation in a measurable way" [5]. The like proactive emotional reactions instigate teachers as lifelong learners for professional development. Golombek and Doran explain that teachers' "...emotional context, reflecting individual teacher's perezhivanie is a motivated, structural component of teachers' processes of cognitive development" (perezhivanie –feeling, emotion) [16, p. 102]. The authors indicate that dissonance between the teacher's real self and the one they aspire to serves as a driving force for growth. Kubanyiova likewise observes how an "emotional dissonance" caused by the difference between teachers' aspirational identity and their actual performance spurs teacher development [22]. In a systematic literature review, Hökka et al. conclude that emotions either support or hinder learning at work. There was also a contrary direction of influence when learning at work influenced emotions [19]. Thus, if teachers are confronted with new tasks subjectively judged by them as surmountable, they treat such tasks as an opportunity for growth. At the same time, the borderline between challenges treated as doable tasks and difficulties for which teachers lack adequate resources is vague. Subjective perceptions of the task difficulty have ramifications for language teachers' decision-making and performance. When teachers perceive tasks as doable, associated challenges have a facilitating effect. Conversely, encountering tasks

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perceived as threats to teachers' competence may have debilitating effect leading to anxiety, stress, and teacher attrition.

Influence of challenges on language teaching

Although there is a dearth of studies evincing the influence of challenges on language teaching and learning, they resonate with implications of teacher cognition and affect observations. Language teachers' perception of challenges can affect their performance and instructional preferences in varied ways. For instance, such perceptions can influence:

– teachers' use of the target language (TL) [10];

– their job resilience, and result in teacher attrition [40; 41];

– their well-being [36];

– teachers' professional identity [38];

– the choice of instructional procedures [34];

– their commitment to learners and school as a whole [35];

– patterns of interaction with learners [43];

– curriculum decisions, instructional focus (form- or meaning-oriented) [9];

– their preferred communication style [24];

– teachers' motivation and job satisfaction [13];

– the level of stress teachers experience [40];

– teachers' goals, priorities, and pace of professional growth [16].

Thus, if teachers feel anxious and insecure about new teaching approaches or techniques, they tend to avoid using them and stick to traditional practices [34]. Shepherd et al. describe how negative experiences associated with failure resulted in drops in affective commitment at the workplace [35]. Challenges associated with classroom management and disruptive student behavior may cause feelings of anxiety and stress in teachers. In this respect, novices are especially vulnerable. Kyriacou points out that student misbehavior causes stress in inexperienced and experienced language teachers alike. In reaction they adopt a more authoritarian style. Teachers in his study felt discomfort and concern over the disciplining measures and the authoritarian style they adopted [24]. Anxiety caused by challenging situations, like fear of making mistakes or not being able to answer students' questions, led a language teacher to become more controlling in the study of Yuan and Lee [43]. Language teachers' perceptions of challenges have ramifications for their job resilience, teacher attrition, and job satisfaction. An EFL teacher in the study of Levrints commented: "The main problem I experienced was student discipline. I had no previous experience in teaching. Dealing with learners was hard, especially with adolescents. I felt students were testing me and my limits. I had trouble establishing my authority in the classroom. I often cried after lessons in the beginning. I was seriously considering quitting teaching. It took very long to learn how to establish a relationship with learners" [25].

One of the principal causes diverting potential candidates from opting for language teaching as a career were challenges associated with insufficient command of the TL in the study by Back and Dean [6]. Research likewise indicates that challenges caused by inadequate knowledge of the target language influence teachers' communicative behavior in the lessons and the amount of time teachers spend speaking it [10]. Teachers' lack of confidence in their proficiency leads them to concentrate more on form-focused instruction rather than meaning-focused. Chacon details that teachers concerned about their level of English proficiency emphasized grammar instruction rather than genuine communication in English lessons [9].

Due to contextual and personal challenges pre-service language teachers face, they may lose their initially high motivation to teach and ultimately abandon teaching as a profession [36]. Challenges encountered by pre-service language teachers can potentially threaten their well-being. In particular, Sulis et al. show how challenges incurred by a transition to distant learning impacted student teachers' well-being. Also, the perceptions of challenges were mediated by language teachers' agency [36].

Challenges EFL teachers face

Perceptions of EFL teaching challenges can be externally or internally motivated, i.e., deriving from the contextual or personal domains. Similarly, challenges are either specific to a discipline or inherent to the teaching profession, irrespective of the content area. The group of external and discipline-specific factors is related to the role of English in the globalized world, where it is a staple for a country's full participation in the world socio-economic and education arena. Hlas formulates a Grand Challenge for foreign language education as follows: "Improve the functional proficiency of all students at a level that allows them to interact for personal and professional pursuits" [17, p. 49]. The special status of English implies "that English teachers worldwide play a seminal role in the development of English competence among its learners, and for teachers to be able to deliver competent speakers, their own professional competence is also a priority [33, p. 1].

The escalation of expectations of EFL learners' communicative competence and teachers' professionalism has raised numerous issues. One of the ensuing debates concerns the expectations of EFL teachers' knowledge base, dispositions, roles, and teachers' capability to live up to them. Many of the challenges EFL teachers experience are captured in the standards, e.g., of language learning or teacher preparation. Normative standards can serve as a checklist against which teachers probe themselves. A detailed look at a range of respective standards shows that they prioritize communicative competence [1]. Earlier language teaching approaches, informed by the theories of structuralism in linguistics and behaviorism in psychology, did not require language teachers to

possess a native-like language proficiency. However, with a shift from form-focused to utility approaches favoring authentic communication in language learning, language teachers' proficiency has been emphasized. As Young et al. comment: "For students at the elementary and school levels, access to teachers who have the necessary professional knowledge and functional English language skills to teach English effectively is critical" [42, p. 1]. Thus, one of the externally generated EFL teaching challenges is language proficiency. As Richards explains: "Using English to teach English can also create an emotional struggle for the teachers." and lack of competence in English can result in feelings of insecurity and frustration [31, p. 228]. Teachers' self-appraised EFL proficiency was shown as a continuous source of stress and doubts over their competence [7; 14]. Also, against the "native-speakerism" bias, EFL non-native speaker teachers feel disadvantaged and challenged [18; 31].

Paralleled with the re-emphasis in the EFL learning objectives of meaningful communication, changes have taken place in the specifications of pedagogical content knowledge in language education. During the "fit-for-all, ideal method" quest, teachers were trained to apply a single method, which did not pose a substantial challenge. Since then, the field has undergone a redefinition in the methodological eclecticism paradigm [37]. Eclecticism in language education involves informed decision-making by language teachers of appropriate didactic interventions and the ability to navigate through a plethora of approaches. Hence, the expectations of teachers' competence have risen dramatically. Language teachers reported being challenged by having to introduce approaches based on communicative language teaching, for instance, task-based language teaching [26]. Despite the transition to methodological eclecticism and focus on communicative language teaching, traditional methods that favor instruction of isolated grammar and vocabulary persist in many national contexts [2; 39].

Resonant with the critical role of language proficiency, language teachers reported teaching speaking a considerable challenge. In a large-scale study involving 4459 teachers worldwide, Copland et al. found that teaching speaking was the most frequently identified challenge. As stated by the language teachers themselves, they struggled to get children to speak and create an English-only classroom [11].

One of the most common EFL teaching challenges is associated with students, including discipline issues, classroom management, motivation, differentiation, and others. Difficulties with an undisciplined class were described as an intimidating experience, requiring the exertion of both novices and expert teachers [12; 28]. The difficulties identified by Riesky were students' rudeness, uncooperativeness, noisiness, low motivation, and language competence, to name a few [32]. Discipline was the second-largest group of language teaching

challenges in the study of Copland et al. [11]. Komar et al. made similar observations in that newly-qualified language teachers experienced serious challenges by maintaining rapport with learners, disciplining them, instructional management, and others [21].

One of the main concerns of language teachers surfacing in the literature is learner motivation. A low level of motivation was one of the main challenges in the studies of Akbari, Akcan, Levrints and Madalińska-Michalak and Bünyamin [2; 3; 25; 29]. Many language learners fail to realize the significance of English or enjoy learning it for various reasons and "try to get a passing mark to get rid of the course" [2, p. 396]. In some national contexts, low learner motivation is a washback effect of high-stakes examinations, where teachers have to fit their teaching to their demands. As a consequence of extensive preparation for written form-focused examinations, students' motivation to acquire English as a means of communication wanes [26].

Many EFL teachers struggle to meet the curriculum requirements. Thus, in the study of Valizadeh, Turkish EFL teachers complained about the pressure of curriculum requirements. In the teachers' words, they were explicitly discouraged from using extra materials apart from course books prescribed by authorities, which stifled innovative and creative language teaching [39]. Another issue concerned the de-emphasis of oral communicative competence in the curriculum. In addition, although many national curricula advocate communicative language teaching, the mandatory language examinations emphasize isolated knowledge of grammar and vocabulary [11].

A few studies indicate that language teachers are also concerned over differentiation of instruction [29]. In an interview study by Levrints, Ukrainian EFL teachers self-reported that they grappled with the need to differentiate instruction and teach mixed-ability classes [25]. Many learners in Ukraine, as in other countries, have varied access to learning opportunities [11]. Better-off parents have their children attend private lessons, which makes for the variance in learners' language proficiency. As a result, teachers need to deal with students with disparate levels of competence.

In many countries language teaching and learning issues stem from inadequate language policy. For instance, Iranians are discouraged from watching satellite TV to avoid its "corruptive" influence. It limits EFL learners' access to authentic language input, resulting in poor communicative competence and low language learning motivation [2]. Similar issues pertain to Ukraine. Although the current language policy stipulates the acquisition of English, the detrimental influence of the language policy induced by Soviet ideology still endures. Disregarding the fact that foreign languages were taught in all schools around the country, the ultimate goal of language education was not language acquisition but knowledge about language. It served to exclude the Ukrainian citizens

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from participating in intercultural communication and coming into closer contact with the English-speaking world [25].

Surprisingly, only an insignificant number of studies have identified EFL teaching challenges deriving from the nature of the discipline itself. Except for teaching speaking and grammar, other aspects of language competence do not regularly feature among the challenges voiced by language teachers themselves. Thus, teachers reported to experience difficulties in explaining grammar in clear terms [25], striving for linguistic accuracy in learners, correcting accuracy errors, and implementing communicative techniques to teach grammar [4]. Many teachers expressed concern about the low motivation for learning grammar, looking upon it "as a necessary evil at best, and an unavoidable burden at worst" [4, p. 69].

A number of studies outline the contextual challenges. In many national milieus, language teachers face significant challenges incurred by the low social status of the language teaching profession, poor remuneration, lack of incentives, lack of respect on the part of students and society, lack of support from colleagues and school administration, inadequate professional guidance and induction, and some others [6; 21; 29; 33; 36].

4. CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Challenges are a cognitive-affective category related to teachers' subjective perception of obstacles associated with language teaching and learning. If teachers possess sufficient resources to tackle challenges, they treat them as an opportunity to improve. Challenges affect language teachers in multiple ways. Most commonly, challenges are associated with a facilitative effect instigating teachers' professional growth. However, if the perception of a challenge is slanted more toward difficulties, it can adversely affect language teachers, leading to stress, burnout, and teacher attrition. Challenges affect teacher performance in various ways. They manifest in language teachers' choice of instructional procedures, patterns of interaction with learners, communication style, usage of the target language, professional identity, curriculum decisions, well-being, job satisfaction, and resilience.

For abstraction, EFL teaching challenges can be grouped into externally and internally motivated to the teacher. External challenges arise from the status of English, language policy and governmental initiatives, curriculum constraints, expectations held of teachers' competence and language teacher roles, student- and instruction-related issues (discipline, learner motivation, mixed-ability classes, instructional management), low social status of the teaching profession, lack of financial incentives and resources, and others. The internal challenges EFL teachers face comprise the personal qualities of teachers and an inadequate level of professional competence. Because language teaching is emotionally challenging, more vulnerable are language teachers with a low level of willingness to communicate, anxiety as a trait characteristic, a low level of emotional intelligence, and stress resilience.

Challenges can further be subdivided into discipline-specific or discipline-independent, i.e., stemming from the nature of the discipline or inherent to all teaching professionals. Language teachers face the challenges of developing communicative competence in learners, especially given the role of English as a means of economic prosperity. Along with the spread of content-based language instruction, different models of bilingual education, and immersion programs, language teachers have to steer between language competence development and teaching the content from other disciplines. It is a daunting perspective for many language teachers, who may lack the necessary competence in the respective fields.

Since this study has only addressed a few of the language teaching intricacies, further research is necessary to unravel the challenges associated with EFL teaching. A subsequent investigation could include a systematic review appraising previous studies of language teacher challenges in light of their relevance for language teaching. It would also be interesting to know if there is any relationship between perceived challenges and teacher misbehavior or whether challenges influence teacher effectiveness.

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ВИКЛИКИ У ВИКЛАДАННІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ЯК ІНОЗЕМНОЇ

Ключовим завданням модернізації сучасної системи іншомовної освіти є забезпечення педагогічного персоналу можливостями професійного розвитку з врахуванням їхніх нагальних потреб і викликів. Водночас у джерельній базі помітний брак наукових розвідок, спрямованих на з'ясування труднощів, які виникають у ході викладання англійської мови як іноземної. З метою усунення означеної прогалини, у статті здійснено докладний аналіз окресленої проблеми в літературі. Зокрема, розглянуто два кола проблем: Перед якими труднощами постають учителі іноземних мов, особливо у світлі оновлених вимог до іншомовної комунікативної компетентності учнів? Яким чином це позначається на професійній діяльності вчителя іноземних мов?

З'ясовано, що труднощі виявляються в особливостях добору дидактичних підходів учителем, взаємодії з учнями, комунікативному стилі вчителя, іншомовній комунікативній поведінці, професійній самоідентифікації, самопочутті вчителя, професійній вдоволеності, стійкості та ін. Труднощі викладання іноземної мови було поділено на зовнішньозумовлені й внутрішньозумовлені щодо педагога, а також на фахові й загальні, властиві педагогічній професії в цілому. До зовнішньозумовлених віднесено труднощі, спричинені вимогами до компетентнісного рівня та ролей вчителя іноземних мов, організацією навчального процесу і взаємодією з учнями (навчальна мотивація, дисципліна, диференціація й індивідуалізація та ін.), низьким соціальним статусом педагогічної професії, недостатньою матеріальною забезпеченістю і соціальною захищеністю, мовною політикою тощо. Внутрішньозумовлені труднощі витікають з особистісних характеристик педагога та його недостатнього компетентнісного рівня. На підставі ґрунтовного аналізу літератури висновковано, що прицільна увага до означеної проблеми допоможе окреслити подальші шляхи оптимізації галузі іншомовної освіти.

Ключові слова: виклики, англійська мова як іноземна, іншомовна освіта, вчитель.

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