



TEACHER COMPETENCIES AND PROFESSIONAL CHALLENGES IN ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) AND ENGLISH AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE (EFL) CONTEXTS

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ABSTRACT

The role of the teacher is central to the success of language education in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. While the ultimate goal of instruction is the same—developing learners’ communicative and linguistic competence—the expectations placed on teachers differ significantly across these contexts. ESL teachers often work with learners who interact with English beyond the classroom, while EFL teachers must create exposure artificially in environments where English is not used for daily communication. As a result, the competencies required of teachers, as well as the challenges they face, vary according to the sociolinguistic, cultural, and educational conditions in which they teach. This thesis examines the essential teacher competencies in ESL and EFL contexts and discusses common professional challenges, offering practical strategies to enhance teacher professionalism and instructional effectiveness

The role of the teacher is central to the success of language education in both English as a Second Language (ESL) and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) settings. While the ultimate goal of instruction is the same—developing learners’ communicative and linguistic competence—the expectations placed on teachers differ significantly across these contexts. ESL teachers often work with learners who interact with English beyond the classroom, while EFL teachers must create exposure artificially in environments where English is not used for daily communication. As a result, the competencies required of teachers, as well as the challenges they face, vary according to the sociolinguistic, cultural, and educational conditions in which they teach. This thesis examines the essential teacher competencies in ESL and EFL contexts and discusses common professional challenges, offering practical strategies to enhance teacher professionalism and instructional effectiveness.

Effective language teaching requires a combination of linguistic, pedagogical, intercultural, and technological competencies. Linguistic competence is fundamental, as teachers must possess a strong command of English and an awareness of language systems, including grammar, pronunciation, and discourse features. In ESL environments, teachers are

often expected to model natural language use and integrate real-life communication into lessons. In EFL settings, teachers must be more intentional in providing authentic input, as learners have limited access to English outside the classroom.

Pedagogical competence is another critical requirement. ESL teachers commonly employ communicative and student-centered approaches that take advantage of real exposure to English. EFL teachers, however, must design activities that compensate for the lack of immersion by using structured tasks, meaningful practice, and materials that simulate real-life communication. Intercultural competence is particularly important in ESL classrooms due to cultural diversity, requiring teachers to promote cultural awareness and mediate intercultural misunderstandings. In contrast, EFL teachers need to develop strategies to introduce cultural aspects of English-speaking countries in a meaningful and relatable way for learners who may have limited cultural contact.

Finally, technological competence has become increasingly vital in modern ESL and EFL classrooms. Teachers must be able to use digital tools, online platforms, and multimedia resources to enhance instruction and provide additional exposure to English. While both contexts benefit from technology, it is especially valuable in EFL settings to bridge the exposure gap and create opportunities for communication with global peers.

Despite their skills, teachers in both contexts encounter challenges that influence their professional performance. ESL teachers may struggle with multicultural classroom dynamics, addressing diverse learning needs, and supporting learners with varying levels of proficiency and prior educational experience. They are also expected to foster academic language proficiency, not only conversational fluency, which requires continuous professional development.

EFL teachers face different but equally complex challenges. Limited exposure to English outside the classroom often results in low learner motivation and reluctance to speak. The pressure of examination-oriented education systems in many EFL countries encourages a focus on grammar and accuracy rather than communication. Additionally, resource limitations, such as a lack of authentic materials or qualified training, can hinder instructional quality. Teachers may also confront societal perceptions of English as a theoretical subject, making it difficult to encourage communicative teaching.

Across both ESL and EFL contexts, teachers frequently report high workloads, limited access to professional development, and insufficient institutional support. These challenges can lead to burnout, reduced job satisfaction, and stagnation in teaching practices if not addressed effectively.

Improving teacher professionalism requires a combination of institutional support and individual initiative. Continuous professional development (CPD) programs, workshops, and peer collaboration are essential for keeping teachers informed about current methodologies, learner needs, and technological advancements. Reflective teaching practices, such as self-evaluation, lesson analysis, and feedback from colleagues, help teachers refine their approaches.

In EFL contexts, partnerships with international institutions, online teacher communities, and participation in global webinars can expand teachers' exposure to best practices and innovative methods. Creating more student-centered and communicative

lessons, encouraging learner autonomy, and incorporating authentic materials can also enhance language learning outcomes. In ESL environments, teachers should focus on strengthening academic literacy, addressing linguistic fossilization, and cultivating critical thinking skills through integrated language activities.

Teacher competencies and challenges in ESL and EFL contexts are shaped by distinct sociolinguistic and educational realities. While ESL teachers benefit from immersive environments, they must balance communication with structured academic instruction. EFL teachers face the task of creating exposure artificially and motivating learners in contexts where English plays a limited role. To improve teaching quality across both settings, educators need access to ongoing professional development, context-sensitive strategies, and institutional support. By fostering teacher growth and adapting pedagogical approaches to the learning environment, education systems can enhance the effectiveness of English language instruction and contribute to better learner outcomes.

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