

Teachers' leadership style in relation with proficiency and teaching experience: A report from an EFL context

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Abstract: A less explored area in teaching practice is how teachers lead their classes, and what affects their leadership styles. The present study was designed to examine how Iranian EFL teachers' language proficiency and teaching experience were related to their leadership style. The study included 89 EFL teachers with 1-24 years of teaching experience. Demographic questions and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (Bass and Avolio, 1997) were used for data collection. The results of Pearson correlation coefficient revealed a significant relationship between some of the transformational leadership factors and teaching experience. In addition, step by step regression analysis showed that the best predictor of teachers' transformational leadership was their years of experience. A significant relationship was also found between the participants' proficiency level and some of the transformational leadership factors as well, which bear messages to policy makers and educators.

Keywords: EFL teachers, English proficiency, leadership style, teaching experience, transformational leadership

INTRODUCTION

Teachers can highly impact their students' success, and this effect is normally coupled with both additive and cumulative factors, which are effective in student's achievement (Sanders, 2000; Sanders & Rivers, 1996). Four roles are conceived of teacher-leaders: improving student achievement, extending their own learning, collaborating for school improvement, and supporting shared vision and values (Wattleton, 2000, p. 1). In the past decades, research into

the training and growth of foreign language teachers has evolved to include more complex factors. One such expansion, in the 21st century, is linked into their individual characteristics, in general, and transformational leadership style in particular (Burkett, 2011).

As the principal human element in classes to effectively lead the learning process and construct a more fruitful learning atmosphere, teachers should be trained for leadership skills. While language proficiency may be considered as the core knowledge base, it needs to strengthen year by year by storing plethora of skills and techniques to successfully teach their learners. However, development of leadership styles appears to surface if leadership is not overlooked by teachers during first years of their teaching experience. The unexplored connection between leadership skills, EFL teachers' language proficiency and years of teaching experience is not carefully taken into account; the consequence of such an incongruence will be the consecutive years of instruction without developing leadership styles. Therefore, a serious attempt of the current study was to explore such a relationship through empirical data as well as its reflection in the literature.

In earlier studies, the impact of transformational leadership on teachers' perceptions and their behaviour (Bogler, 2001; Griffith, 2004; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2006) is reported, but few studies have focused on the relationship between teachers' teaching experience and leadership skills. The authors of the present study felt that these two factors could presumably be related to teachers' teaching experience in the sense that that year by year, they move toward gaining leadership skills and becoming experienced teachers, in the long run, acquiring superior leadership skills compared to beginning teachers (Wattleton, 2000). In addition, Wattleton (2000) believes that teachers' leadership skills evolve from knowledge, dedication, and experience (p. 1). Moreover, in EFL contexts, less experienced teachers are more preoccupied with issues such as their own linguistic competence and performance rather than higher order skills such as transformational leadership. In fact, while most novice teachers are still developing their linguistic competence, their incessant efforts are directed towards acquisition of sufficient knowledge of the norms and conventions of the foreign language they teach; most of the time, language elements such as syntax, spelling, and pronunciation are still a matter of concern for them. This affects their manifested language proficiency until they reach a state of stability in regard with the instructional materials. Then they will have adequate time to draw on leadership skills for getting students deeply engaged with their course materials and enhance their achievement outcomes (Khany & Ghoreysi, 2013).

Consequently, the present study was designed to investigate the relationship between novice and experienced EFL teachers' transformational leadership style and their language proficiency levels. Two research questions were shaped to investigate the concern of this research:

1. Is there a significant relationship between EFL teachers' English language level and leadership style?
2. Is there a significant relationship between Iranian EFL teachers' years of experience and leadership style?

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Teachers' leadership style

There has been no consensus among scholars about what makes some teachers more effective leaders than others, and how such effectiveness can be predicted. In fact, it is not easy to

provide an all-inclusive definition of leaders' effectiveness because it embraces a wide array of variables. Its definition may entail multiple components including organisational contingencies and various personal and interpersonal behaviours. Therefore, we shall briefly present different perspectives below and explain how these components help us grasp its complex nature. Researchers have different views about leadership and leaders' effectiveness in educational settings (Firmansyah, Prasajo, Jaedun & Retnawati, 2022). For example, Yukl, Gordon, & Taber (2002) argue that effective leadership is the process through which you influence others so that they understand and agree about what should be done and how it can be collectively done for efficacy. Cooper and Nirenberg (2004) view leader effectiveness as the successful exercise of personal influence by one or more people that results in accomplishing shared objectives so that it can satisfy all stakeholders. In addition, in higher education, it is recommended for the implementation of transformative educational programs (Ghorbani, et al., 2023). Scholars differently define and operationalize leadership; however, they do not provide a response to the raised concerns of the present study; rather, they underscore those positive and convincing outcomes that effective leadership should provide.

In education, such definitions are interpreted as "transformational leadership" where educators; deans, principals, professors and teachers, take the role of a leader to help learners effectively follow their model. Educational leader dwell on creating community bonds, and encourage the students to achieve greater levels of achievement. These teachers act as models of ethics and progress; they further appear as agents of inspiring and encouraging learners, establishing and developing the relationship with students, mentoring, tutoring and inspiring to change (Bass, 1985; Seltzer & Bass, 1990). Transformational leadership is described in seven dimensions: (1) idealized influence behaviour, (2) inspirational motivation, (3) intellectual stimulation, (4) individualized consideration, (5) contingent reward, (6) management-by-exception, and (7) laissez-faire leadership (May, 2010; Sutherland, 2010). The nature of transformational leadership style can be related to students' needs which are found to facilitate learning processes. Sutherland (2010) argued that transformational leadership builds a relationship between 'leaders' (i.e., teachers in our case) and 'followers' (i.e. students in our case) where it is the leaders who take the initiative and evoke the followers to 'follow the desired action' to successfully achieve those shared instructional objectives. Therefore, leaders and followers can cooperate and make efforts to enhance their inspiration (Sutherland, 2010). Generally, these studies stress the need for developing skills of leadership by teachers for enhancing the efficacy of learning. However, its relationship with other variables in the present study needs to be considered.

Language proficiency

Language proficiency is generally defined as "an idealized level of competence and performance, attainable by experts through extensive instruction" (Hadley 2003, p. 2). The word 'proficient' is often used interchangeably with terms such as "being good, fluent, knowledgeable, bilingual and competent" (McNamara 1996).

While the relationship between language proficiency and leadership is less directly explored, its association with self-efficacy (as a subcomponent of teachers' leadership competency) has been sporadically investigated among non-native EFL teachers (Chacón, 2005; Eslami & Fatahi, 2008; Yilmaz, 2011; Choi & Lee, 2016; Marashi & Azizi-Nasab, 2018; Faez & Karas, 2021). For instance, 104 EFL teachers' self-efficacy in getting students engaged in instructional activities in Venezuela considerably correlated with their mastery over four language skills (i.e. speaking, listening, reading and writing) (Chacón, 2005). Also, Choi and Lee (2016) investigated teachers' self-reported English proficiency and their instructional

efficacy, and concluded that language proficiency was related to pedagogical skills. A meta-analysis by Faez and Karas (2021) further highlighted the positive correlation between English language teachers' proficiency and their perceived self-efficacy. In addition, teachers' self-efficacy was correlated with their language proficiency in another EFL context (Marashi & Azizi-Nassab, 2018). According to Faez and Karas (2021), the role of specific language skills (e.g. speaking, listening) and how they interact with different teaching abilities (e.g. classroom management) are not strongly associated. Similarly, Marashi and Azizi-Nasab (2018) did not find a correlation between language proficiency and effective classroom management. In fact, one of the reasons behind designing the present study was that, to the best knowledge of the authors, few studies have directly investigated the relationship between teachers' language proficiency and their leadership skills. Therefore, we opted for searching for self-efficacy and classroom management skills as subcomponents of teachers' leadership, hoping to provide insights into relevance of (or absence of such a relationship with) teachers' language proficiency with leadership skills.

Years of teaching experience

Years of teaching experience generally contribute to the enrichment of teachers' repertoire of pedagogic skills both by applying knowledge into experience, and framing experiences back into scientific constructs. Earlier studies have investigated the relationship between years of teaching experience and some variables. In a sample of 1,430 practicing teachers, Klassen and Chiu (2010) reported the relationship between teachers' experience, their characteristics (e.g. gender and teaching level), three self-efficacy domains (teaching methods, classroom management and student involvement) and their job satisfaction. In the past decades, a growing number of studies have also claimed that 'transition' from teacher education programmes to the actual practice has become an undeniable challenge (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002; Veenman, 1984). Expected to develop over time, teachers' leadership style has also found a remarkable place (Hattie, 2009); however, to what extent they are interrelated is not well documented. Most novice teachers encounter a densely arranged teaching schedule and may find themselves deprived of such a leadership style (Tynjälä & Heikkinen, 2011). Similarly, Mills (2011) found a relationship between novice EFL teachers' content and pedagogical knowledge and their self-efficacy. However, other studies have shown that pedagogical knowledge can improve over time (Swanson, 2014), and positively contribute to teachers' self-efficacy. Also, Wolters and Daugherty (2007) reported that teachers in their first year of teaching showed significantly lower self-efficacy for instructional practices and classroom management than did experienced teachers.

METHODOLOGY

Participants

The participants were 89 EFL teachers (31 males and 58 females) in Zahedan, Iran, with an age range of 22 to 49 years; they were recruited by convenience sampling. The participants' teaching experience ranged from 1 to 24 years in language schools/institutes. A majority of them had bachelor's degree (about 62%), and the rest had master's degree (about 34%), or PhD degrees (about 4%). The inclusion criteria were their availability, permanent teaching practice

and agreement to join as participants; they were given information about the purpose of the study, and were free to leave the study whenever they desired.

Instruments

Two data collection instruments were employed in this study. The first instrument was the Transformational Leadership Questionnaire (TLQ). The former (i.e. Transformational Leadership Questionnaire) was used to assess the participants' leadership score from their own point of view. Designed by Bass and Avolio (1997), this questionnaire evaluates two leadership styles including 'transactional' and 'transformational' leadership styles. In this study, we just used the transformational aspect which contains 21 items on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = not at all, 1 = once in a while, 2 = sometimes, 3 = fairly often, 4 = 'frequently, if not always'). It includes seven factors: idealized influence behaviour (Factor 1), inspirational motivation (Factor 2), intellectual stimulation (Factor 3), individualized consideration (Factor 4), contingent reward (Factor 5), management-by-exception (Factor 6), and laissez-faire leadership (Factor 7). Bass and Avolio (1997) reported its reliability based on 14 studies in financial, industrial, military and medical occupations to range from 0.81 to 0.94; they also validated it against the Leader Behaviour Description Questionnaire (LBDQ).

The second scale was the Quick Oxford Placement Test (Quick OPT), which was used for determining the participants' language level. The test is comprised of 60 items (scored from 0 to 60) which measures the participants' knowledge of English grammar and vocabulary. The interpretation guide to this test considers a score of 47 or higher as 'high proficient'; scores below 47 are considered as 'low proficient'.

Procedures and Data Analysis

The process of data collection started in June, 2020, lasted for about two months, and ended in August, 2020. First, the Quick OPT was given to the participants to assign them into two categories: 'high proficient' and 'low proficient'. Moreover, 89 codes were assigned to 89 participants to keep their information anonymous and confidential. After the participants took the OPT, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) was administered. After collecting the data, the participants were divided into two groups: novice teachers (with 1-5 years of teaching experience) and experienced teachers (with 6-24 years of teaching experience). In order to make the distinction between novice and experienced teachers, we conservatively used Freeman's (2001) definition, who divides novice teachers as those having less than three years of experience and experienced teachers as those having five or more years of experience. To be on the safe side, we made a consensus to split the participants as those with less than five years of experience as novice teachers, and those with more than five years of experience as experienced ones. Finally, the collected data were fed into SPSS, and analysed using descriptive and inferential statistics.

Results

The participants were 89 EFL teachers (31 males and 58 females); their age ranged from 22 to 49 years; their teaching experience ranged from 1 to 24 years in language schools/institutes. A majority of them had bachelor's degree (about 62%), and the rest had master's degree (about 34%), or PhD degrees (about 4%). Of the whole participants, 30 teachers were novice and 59 teachers were experienced. Besides, 38 participants got test scores below 47 ('low proficient'); 51 participants got scores above 47 and were considered 'high proficient'.

The results of the study showed that 'intellectual stimulation' (Factor 3), 'contingent reward' (Factor 5), and 'management-by-exception' (Factor 6) correlated with teachers'

proficiency levels (Table 1). To examine whether leadership factors differ significantly between ‘low proficient’ and ‘high proficient’ teachers, t-test was used for the two independent groups. Based on the results shown in Table 1, it was found that the significance level of Levene’s test is greater than 0.05; therefore, first-line results led to accepting the assumption of equality of variances for the two groups. According to the results, the values of *t* for factors 3, 5 and 6 were significant at the level of 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$). Indeed, there is a significant difference between these factors in the two groups. Comparison of the means showed that this value for ‘high proficient’ teachers is higher compared to ‘low proficient’ teachers. According to the results, the values of *t* were not significant for factors 1, 2, 4 and 7 at the level of 0.05 ($p \geq 0.05$), which shows that no significant difference exists between these factors in the two groups.

Table 1: Relationship between teachers’ language levels and factors in MLQ

Leadership factors	Proficiency	Mean	Levene’s test		SD	T	Significance level
			F	Sig			
F1	High	3.7179	.119	.731	-.481	126	.631
	Low	3.7725					
F2	High	3.6256	.093	.761	-.242	126	.809
	Low	3.6614					
F3	High	3.4462	.629	.429	16.828	126	.000
	Low	2.2646					
F4	High	3.7077	.024	.877	-.173	126	.863
	Low	3.7302					
F5	High	2.7692	.472	.493	6.042	126	.000
	Low	2.3069					
F6	High	2.7179	.011	6.718	4.665	126	.000
	Low	2.3228					
F7	High	2.7179	.662	.192	-.230	126	.818
	Low	2.7407					

Another major finding concerns the relationship between the MLQ factors and years of teaching experience in novice and experienced teachers (Table 2). In fact, all components in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) correlated with participants’ years of teaching experience. To examine whether leadership factors differ significantly in novice and experienced teachers, t-test was used for the two independent groups. Based on the results shown in Table 2, it was found that the significance level of Levene’s test is greater than 0.05, so first-line results are used which led to accepting the assumption of equality of variances for the two groups. Based on the results, the value of *t* was significant for all factors at the level of 0.05 ($p \leq 0.05$). Indeed, there was a significant difference between the two groups (i.e. novice and experienced teachers) as regards the seven leadership factors.

Table 2: Relationship between teachers' years of teaching experience and MLQ factors

Leadership factors	Proficiency level	Mean	Levene's test		SD	T	Significance level
			F	s			
F1	Experienced	3.7179	.274	.678	126	16.121	.000
	Novice	2.2275					
F2	Experienced	3.6256	.671	.456	126	12.130	.000
	Novice	2.2169					
F3	Experienced	3.4462	.803	.372	126	17.429	.000
	Novice	2.2328					
F4	Experienced	3.7077	.386	.523	126	14.625	.000
	Novice	2.2116					
F5	Experienced	3.8718	.065	.856	126	17.246	.000
	Novice	2.1905					
F6	Experienced	2.7692	.001	.973	126	7.280	.000
	Novice	2.190					
F7	Experienced	2.7179	.694	.419	126	6.453	.000
	Novice	2.1693					

Another major aspect concerns the correlation between the research variables before examining regression models, by the use of Pearson correlation coefficient. This statistical measure shows whether performing a regression is allowed or not, and which variables can be included in the regression model. In fact, independent variables are allowed to enter the regression model if their correlation with the dependent variable is significant.

Correlations between research variables were found to be significant at the level of one percent error. Therefore, the independent variable was fed into the regression model since in the correlation, it was found that years of teaching experience was likely to be a good predictor of the leadership factors (Table 3).

Table 3: Correlation between years of teaching experience and leadership factors

	Experience	Leadership
Experience	1	
Leadership	.812	1

In order to test this hypothesis, a linear regression model was used. Table 4 summarizes the statistics related to model fit; and the value of multiple correlation coefficients (R) equals 0.812, which indicates a direct correlation between years of teaching experience and leadership factors. R² indicates the amount of explanation of leadership variance by years of teaching experience (Table 4). The adjusted R² value is 0.657, which indicates that years of teaching experience can explain about 66% of the leadership changes. Durbin-Watson results confirmed the independence of observations (independence of residual values or errors) from each other (Table 4). Durbin-Watson statistics range from 0 to 4. If there is no consecutive correlation between the residuals, the value of this statistic should be close to 2; if it is close to zero, it indicates a positive correlation, and if it is close to 4, it indicates a negative correlation. In general, the range of this statistic should fall between 1.5 and 2.5.

Table 4: Summary of the linear regression model

Model	R	R2	Adjusted R2	Standard Error	Watson camera
Value	.812	.659	.657	.38768	1.670

As Table 5 indicates, the value of F was reported at a significant error level of 0.01, which indicates that years of teaching experience can be a good predictor of leadership factors, and the regression model has a good fit.

Table 5: The sum of squares and value of regression

Model	Sum of squares	Degree of freedom	Mean of squares	F	Sig
Regression	36.663	1	36.663	36	.000 ^b
Residual	18.937	126	.150		
Total value	55.600	127			

Finally, Tables 6 shows the results for the standard impact factor. It indicates that the Beta coefficient is 0.812, and the value of “t” for this variable is significant at the error level of 0.01; in other words, by increasing one standard deviation in the ‘teachers’ experience’ variable, the ‘leadership’ variable increases by 0.812 standard deviation.

Table 6: The standard impact factor

Variable	Unstandardized coefficients		Standardized coefficients	t	Sig
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
Constant	.150	.230		.653	.515
Experience	.999	.064	.812	15.619	

DISCUSSION

The present study was conducted to examine how Iranian EFL teachers’ language proficiency and teaching experience were related to MLQ leadership factors. The findings revealed that three leadership factors correlated with teachers’ proficiency levels: ‘intellectual stimulation’ (Factor 3), ‘contingent reward’ (Factor 5), and ‘management-by-exception’ (Factor 6). Also, it was found that all seven components in the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ) correlated with the participants’ years of teaching experience.

Despite earlier studies on the leadership aspects (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Harrison, 2011), the literature we studied did not suggest a definite evidence that teachers who have greater language proficiency would successfully use more transformational leadership behaviours. However, our findings revealed a significant relationship between the participants’ proficiency level and some of the transformational leadership factors (intellectual stimulation, contingent reward and management-by-exception). On the other hand, from a motivational aspect, it is certain that leadership factors can enrich the quality of instruction, encourage teachers to reach their greater potential, and improve both organisational performance and student achievement (Dowling, 2007; Wattleton, 2000). Therefore, the findings of the present study support the idea

that developing leadership factors are advantageous for teachers; also, it appears true that the transformational leadership style positively and significantly correlates with teachers' language proficiency.

This study also investigated the correlation between teachers' transformational leadership and years of teaching experience, and aimed to extend the literature on teachers' professional leadership and years of work. The results revealed a significant relationship between these variables, which is in line with the findings of Kyriacou (1993) and Paula and Gr̄infelde (2018) who reported that early-career teachers had challenges with classroom management and other leadership issues such as relations with colleagues, time management and lesson organisation. Furthermore, in the first few years of teaching, teachers tend to improve their teaching abilities through intensive professional growth (Kelchtermans & Ballet, 2002). During the early years of teaching practice, their professional identity also grows promptly (Flores & Day, 2006).

CONCLUSION

Based on theoretical arguments, 'high proficient' teachers are likely to be more successful on providing intellectual stimulation, offering individualized support, as well as modelling best practices and important organisational values, which constitute the backbone of transformational leadership (Wattleton, 2000). Accordingly, teachers need various leadership skills, acceptable language proficiency levels and professional development through their own experiences. Developing classroom leadership styles can motivate teachers and leads them to manifest their best performance by using their expertise in adjusting the teaching-learning process to move towards a more productive atmosphere for students (Ashwin et al., 2020). In addition, transformational leadership can help educators in improving the quality of education particularly in low- and middle-income countries (Hyseni & Hoxha, 2021). In other words, the higher the teachers' experience, the better their transformational leadership becomes. Teachers may opt for a mutual benefit if they intelligently take initiative to develop leadership skills, and enrich their leadership skills by a reflective reference to routine instructional experiences over time. Attending in-service courses and moving towards a permanent concern of professional development can guarantee their success in achieving the ultimate goal of instruction. Despite its limitations and shortcomings, the present study provides insights for educators, language teaching professionals, policy makers, and organisational managers to highlight the role of leadership in EFL teacher training.

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