

Professional Standards in TEFL: A Challenge for Asia

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The paper examines the meaning of professionalism in TEFL, with specific reference to non-native speaker teachers working in the public sector, and discusses the Hong Kong Government's recent attempts to set professional standards for EFL teachers. The first part of the paper explores some of the wider issues, in particular the nature of the distinctive knowledge base that would justify considering TEFL as a profession. The paper argues that professionalism in TEFL involves the possession of adequate knowledge of the language, adequate knowledge about the language, and adequate Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) in pedagogical practice. The second part of the paper focuses on initiatives in Hong Kong to set professional standards in the first two of these areas. It begins by discussing attempts to set standards in relation to knowledge of the language through the introduction of the Language Proficiency Requirement (LPR). The paper then considers the recent specifications regarding subject matter knowledge, that EFL teachers should possess relevant degree qualifications (as evidence of adequate knowledge about the language). It concludes by reporting the results of a small-scale study of the validity of the 'relevant degree' as a criterion in setting standards for the subject matter knowledge of EFL teachers.

The aim of the present paper is to explore the meaning of professionalism in relation to TEFL and to discuss recent attempts to set professional standards for teachers of EFL in one part of Asia. As the title suggests, there

is an underlying assumption that TEFL is a profession, and that therefore those who engage in the teaching of English as a Foreign Language should be required to possess the qualities (and perhaps also qualifications certifying the possession of those qualities) associated with the epithet 'professional.'

In addressing such a topic, however, it is important first of all to clarify the meaning attached to that word 'professional'. The two most relevant meanings as listed in the Oxford English Dictionary Online would seem to be the following:

- 'engaged in one of the learned or skilled professions, or in a calling considered socially superior to a trade or handicraft'
- 'reaching a standard or having the quality expected of a professional person or his work; competent in the manner of a professional' (OED Online, 2004)

However, when applied to TEFL, there are problems with the first of those definitions, at least in some parts of the world. In Britain, for example, according to Thornbury, there is a public perception that TEFL '... is a low status, even slightly disreputable thing to do' (Thornbury, 2001, p. 391). Meanwhile, Pugsley (1991) refers to English Language teaching in the UK as both trade and profession, saying that 'It has become the focus of controversies as to whether EFL teaching is best considered as part of trade, or training, or education in one of the by-ways of the academic world' (Pugsley, 1991, p. 313).

It is the second of the two meanings above (*'reaching a standard or having the quality expected of a professional person or his work; competent in the manner of a professional'*) that constitutes the focus of the present paper, although it is important to note even in relation to this meaning that the suggestions that TEFL is a profession and that it is appropriate to attempt to set professional standards in TEFL are not uncontested in the literature. For example, Thornbury (2001) remarks that 'Much has been made of the need to raise and/or maintain standards in order to ensure the professionalism of EFL. But the question remains: is TEFL really a profession? And, if so,

what standards should it be judged by?' (Thornbury, 2001, p. 392).

At the same time, however, and particularly in a forum such as the Asia TEFL Journal, Thornbury's questions and sceptical views need to be set in context: in a footnote to his paper he makes clear that his comments relate primarily to native speaker teachers of EFL, rather than to non-native speaker teachers, most of whom have, in his words, '... trained long and hard to achieve a measure of local respect, and can claim to have earned the professionalism that still eludes the so-called native speaker EFL teacher' (Thornbury, 2001, p. 396). The discussion in the present paper, in contrast with Thornbury (2001), is mainly concerned with issues of professionalism as they affect the non-native speaker EFL teacher, and teachers working within the public sector.

Whether or not one considers it appropriate to refer to TEFL as a profession or to attempt to establish professional standards for TEFL practitioners, it cannot be denied that there have been increasing calls in different parts of the world for the establishment of minimum requirements for teachers of English. Such calls have often been associated, particularly in post-colonial societies such as Hong Kong, with perceptions that standards of English are declining (see, for example, Tsui & Andrews, 2002), a decline for which teachers are assumed to be partly responsible. These perceptions tend to be based on a comparison between present-day language standards and those of a mythical 'golden age' of language learning, a comparison which is not fair because it takes no account of societal changes, and in particular of the fact that the present-day demand for proficient English speakers far outstrips the supply, a situation which the teachers are largely powerless to remedy. Nevertheless, there may be justification for concern about the standards of EFL teachers in many parts of the world, because the burgeoning demand for English worldwide has resulted in large numbers of inadequately prepared EFL teachers working in both the private and public sectors.

Whilst acknowledging that treating TEFL as a profession is a contested issue, the present paper unapologetically takes the view that teachers of EFL should be considered as professionals, particularly, as Thornbury (2001)

appears to accept, non-native speaker teachers working in the public sector. The following sections examine the implications of such a view. The paper then focuses on the efforts to establish professional standards for public-sector EFL teachers in one specific Asian context, in order to highlight some of the issues and challenges associated with such endeavours wherever standard setting is attempted.

THE TEACHER (OF EFL) AS PROFESSIONAL

If teaching is to be considered a profession, then there is an underlying assumption that the practitioner needs to be in possession of a knowledge base (or set of knowledge bases) distinctive to the profession. The nature of teacher knowledge and teacher learning has been extensively researched (see, for example, Freeman's 2002 review of the North American literature in this area). The discussion in the present paper draws in particular on the ideas of Shulman (for instance, Shulman, 1986a, 1986b, 1987) and two recent reconceptualisations of expert teaching which themselves draw on Shulman's work: Turner-Bisset (2001) and Tsui (2003). Shulman (1986a) emphasised the need for educational research to focus on the 'missing paradigm': the study of '... teachers' cognitive understanding of subject matter content and the relationships between such understanding and the instruction teachers provide for students' (Shulman, 1986a, p. 25). The work of Shulman and his associates (see, for example, Wilson, Shulman & Richert, 1987) was intended to produce a 'knowledge base for teaching' (Shulman, 1987). Shulman identified a number of distinct components of that knowledge base, but his principal interest was in the relationship between knowledge of subject matter content and knowledge of pedagogy. He introduced the term *pedagogical content knowledge* (PCK) to describe the '... special amalgam of content and pedagogy that is uniquely the province of teachers, their own special form of professional understanding' (Shulman, 1987, p. 8). Both Turner-Bisset (2001) and Tsui (2003), in their reconceptualisations of teacher

knowledge, acknowledge the central importance of subject matter knowledge, while emphasising the integrated nature of teacher knowledge. According to Tsui (2003), for example, '... teacher knowledge as manifested in teachers' classroom practices is often an integrated whole that cannot be separated into distinct knowledge domains' (Tsui, 2003, p. 65). Tsui suggests that teacher knowledge as embodied in the act of teaching can be perceived as two intertwined dimensions: the management of teaching and learning and the enactment of the curriculum in the classroom, with the latter referring to 'the effective representation of the subject matter being taught' (Tsui, 2003, p. 59).

Recently, Shulman (1999) has argued that the nature of teaching, with its constant demand for principled responses to unpredictable situations, places it on a par with other professions: 'We have come to understand that teachers are professionals precisely because they operate under conditions of inherent novelty, uncertainty, and chance. Although there may be curricula that strive to prescribe teachers' behaviour with great precision, for most teachers a typical day is fraught with surprises' (Shulman, 1999, p. xii-xiii). Because of this, according to Shulman, teachers' work '... cannot be controlled by rules, even though it must be governed by standards' (p. xiii).

Shulman (1999) develops his argument regarding standards, saying that; 'Professionalism demands thoughtful, grounded actions under complex and uncertain conditions that are nevertheless guided by, rooted in, and framed by clear professional standards. A professional both acts wisely and can explain his or her actions' (p. xiii). He then affirms his view that knowledge of subject matter is at the core of teacher professionalism. As he puts it, '... deep, flexible and confident understanding of subject matter makes possible the kinds of professional autonomy and responsiveness that the teaching of all youngsters requires' (p. xiii). Shulman makes clear that such knowledge is necessary but by no means sufficient: the professional teacher needs a range of other knowledge bases. Nevertheless, subject matter knowledge is the core. Therefore, he argues, '... professional teachers must be well educated, especially in the subject matter they teach, and ... their career-long professional education experiences must continue to be grounded in the centrality of that

content' (p. xiii).

SUBJECT MATTER KNOWLEDGE IN THE EFL CONTEXT

Shulman presents powerful arguments in support of the notion of the teacher as professional and the central role that subject matter knowledge plays in enabling the teacher to act as a professional. But what are the implications of such arguments for EFL teachers and the TEFL profession?

According to Thornbury (2001), Widdowson (1998) proposes that professionalism in TEFL is at least in part dependent upon a knowledge of linguistics: 'Like other professional people (doctors, lawyers, accountants), teachers claim authority because of specialised knowledge and expertise ... The subject for language teachers is a language, and so it is obviously this that they need to know about ... A knowledge of the subject, English as a foreign language, presupposes some knowledge at least about language as a whole ... In other words, knowing the language subject depends in some degree on the study of linguistics' (Widdowson, 1998, cited by Thornbury, 2001, p. 392).

Thornbury (2001) cites Widdowson in order to argue against this 'academic model' of TEFL, suggesting that such an aspiration to what he describes as 'sham' respectability is misguided in a number of ways. First, placing language as subject on a par with, for example, medicine and law as subjects ignores the uniqueness of language, which can be both content and medium of instruction. Second, according to Thornbury, this 'academic model' over-inflates the importance of declarative knowledge of subject matter: the 'what' of teaching. In so doing, it downplays the importance of the 'how' of teaching.

Thornbury makes a valid point when he suggests that teachers need more than just declarative knowledge: declarative knowledge can indeed be a danger in the hands of the teacher who is an over-zealous transmitter of such knowledge. I would nevertheless argue that subject matter knowledge is the core of good teaching, whether of EFL or of any other subject. However,

such a statement begs the question as to the precise meaning of subject matter knowledge in the EFL context. As Turner-Bisset (2001) observes, '... subject knowledge means different things to different people, and it is important to determine exactly what is meant by subject knowledge' (Turner-Bisset, 2001, p. 21). In the present paper, the conceptualisation of subject matter knowledge is that encapsulated in the construct Teacher Language Awareness (TLA), as outlined in, for example, Andrews (2001, 2003).

The argument that EFL teachers need to possess language awareness is not a new one. Wright and Bolitho (1993), for instance, assert that '... the more aware a teacher is of language and how it works, the better' (Wright & Bolitho, 1993, p. 292). But what does Teacher Language Awareness (TLA) mean? What is the relationship between TLA and pedagogical practice? And what are the implications for our discussion of professional standards in TEFL of taking such a view of subject matter knowledge?

In Andrews's (2001, 2003) model of TLA, it is suggested that the relationship between subject matter knowledge and EFL classroom teaching is very complex. One factor contributing to that complexity is the relationship between knowledge of subject matter and language proficiency. In contexts where English is taught through the medium of English, the relationship is in part one of mediation, with the teacher's knowledge of subject matter being mediated through that teacher's proficiency in English. At the same time, TLA is also metacognitive, involving reflections upon both knowledge of subject matter and language proficiency, as a basis for the tasks of planning and teaching. This is what Brumfit (1997) refers to as '... the central role of teachers as educational linguists (i.e. as conscious analysts of linguistic processes, both their own and others')' (Brumfit, 1997, p. 163). TLA also, as Brumfit (1997) implies and Wright (2002) explicitly suggests, encompasses an awareness of language from the learner's perspective, an awareness of the learner's developing interlanguage, and an awareness of the extent to which the language content of materials/lessons poses difficulties for students. At the same time, TLA is closely integrated with other components of pedagogical content knowledge in the 'enactment of the curriculum' (Tsui, 2003). Indeed,

it is in the enactment of the curriculum that the importance of the procedural dimension of TLA becomes apparent: possession of knowledge about language (the declarative dimension of TLA) is necessary but not sufficient to ensure language-aware pedagogical practice.

The decisions and actions taken by EFL teachers are, of course, influenced by any or all of the components of pedagogical content knowledge, and not just by their TLA. However, the view adopted in the present paper, following Shulman (1999), is that for such decisions and actions to have the best possible chance of contributing positively to learning, they need to be grounded in ‘... a deep, flexible and confident understanding of subject matter’ (Shulman, 1999, p. xiii). In the case of the teacher of EFL, those adjectives would be seen as applying to that teacher’s language awareness, which forms the core of professionalism in TEFL.

Following such an argument, if we base our view of the professional knowledge base(s) required by EFL teachers upon a construct such as TLA, then the implications are that professionalism in TEFL involves the possession of:

- a) adequate knowledge of the language (language proficiency);
- b) adequate knowledge about the language (subject matter knowledge: the declarative dimension of TLA); and
- c) adequate TLA in pedagogical practice (the procedural dimension of TLA).

If that is the case, then a focus on professional standards in TEFL immediately forces us to confront such issues as:

- a) What do we consider to be ‘adequate’ levels of knowledge and awareness?
and
- b) How do we know that a teacher possesses such knowledge and awareness (i.e., what would we consider to be appropriate indicators or measurement instruments)?

These are challenging issues, and any attempt to address them would need

to take full account of the context (societal and professional) in which teachers are working. The remainder of the paper examines recent efforts to address these issues in the Hong Kong context. The focus of the discussion will be on a) and b) above: knowledge of language and knowledge about language. This is not to deny the importance of c) the procedural dimension of TLA: on the contrary, the classroom is where the potential impact of TLA is at its greatest. However, the first two areas are those that have been explicitly addressed by the Hong Kong Government. These two areas – language proficiency and declarative knowledge of subject matter - will be dealt with in turn. This does not imply that the boundaries between them are distinct, but merely reflects the way in which the Hong Kong Government has dealt with them.

SETTING PROFESSIONAL STANDARDS FOR EFL TEACHERS: THE HONG KONG EXPERIENCE

In the mid 1990s, in response to concerns in the community about a perceived decline in standards of English (as mentioned earlier), work started on the development of a battery of tests that would measure the language proficiency level of serving and prospective teachers of English. At the same time, work began on a similar assessment battery for Putonghua. The Government's aim was to set in place a Language Proficiency Requirement (LPR) for teachers of the two languages.

According to the Government's most recent LPR documentation (Hong Kong Government, 2004):

- 'The purpose of setting language proficiency levels is to promote effective teaching and enhance the quality of education.
- Language proficiency levels provide an objective reference against which teachers' proficiency can be gauged to help them pursue continuous professional development.
- The government's objective is to ensure that all language teachers possess at

least basic language proficiency. Teachers are also encouraged to strive for higher levels of language proficiency, and to enhance their professionalism in subject knowledge and pedagogy through training.' (p. 1)

The English test (the Language Proficiency Assessment for Teachers, or LPAT) consists of five papers: Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing and Classroom Language Assessment (See Appendix A for a description of the five papers). Performance on each paper is graded on a scale of 1 to 5. Level 3 is the 'benchmark' level on each paper. A teacher can fulfil the Government's LPR by one of three routes: obtaining level 3 in all five papers of the LPAT; attending a course at Government expense (serving teachers only) and achieving a similar level of performance on the course provider's internal assessment; or securing exemption through the possession of a relevant degree plus relevant professional training. The tests were introduced in 2001-2002 and have been administered twice a year since then. New teachers joining the profession who were not exempted were initially given two years to demonstrate that they met the LPR: from 2004-2005 they have to demonstrate this before taking up their post. Serving teachers were given until the end of 2004-2005 to show that they had met the LPR.

On the face of it, the Government's attempt to 'enhance the quality of education' through measures such as these seems laudable. However, the introduction of the LPR innovation was poorly handled and its impact upon the teaching community has generally been perceived to be negative. Before the LPR policy was officially announced in 2000, the Government had already aroused the displeasure of the teachers' unions by publicising its intention to impose a mandatory test of English teachers' language proficiency (at that stage the proposed battery of tests was referred to as the 'Benchmark' test). In an attempt to defuse the situation, the Government introduced the option of the training route to fulfilling the LPR (an alternative that had not formed part of its original plans), accepted a wide range of qualifications as grounds for exemption, and removed the word 'benchmark' from all references to the LPR and associated assessment procedures. However, these actions have done little to appease serving teachers. There is a widespread

view within the profession that the LPR has made little or no difference to the quality of language education, and that its main impact has been to demoralise language teachers and impose unreasonable pressures upon them.

There are a number of reasons why the LPR arouses such negative emotions among the majority of language teachers:

- The LPR is mandatory and identical for both primary and secondary teachers of English. It is highly debatable, however, whether primary school teachers of English need the same level of language proficiency as their secondary counterparts.
- The LPAT is unnecessarily difficult to pass. The number of teachers passing the Writing paper, in particular, is very low (only 37 per cent of candidates at the March 2004 sitting, for example). This situation is largely attributable to two factors: the inclusion in the paper of a task requiring the explanation of errors in writing (relevant to a teacher's work, but arguably a test of subject matter knowledge, not language proficiency), and the insistence (contrary to the advice of the developers of the LPAT battery) that candidates must pass every part of a paper rather than allowing the grade on each paper to be holistic.
- The results are made public on the web, and are seized on by the media as confirmation of the perception of falling standards. In June 2003, for example, the South China Morning Post (SCMP) headlined an article 'Bottom of the class – the school with nine teachers who failed', while in June 2004, following publication of the most recent set of LPAT results, another SCMP article appeared under the misleading headline 'English teaching skills plummet'. The headline was misleading not just because the LPAT is not a test of teaching skills but also because any comparison of results from one sitting to another (as implied by the verb 'plummet') is meaningless given unavoidable differences in the composition of the groups of candidates at each administration.
- Many school principals have acted on the LPAT results in a rigid and insensitive way: dismissing or redeploying teachers who fail on any part of the test battery. In many cases, those teachers may have been competent and extremely conscientious. However, principals have taken punitive action largely out of fear of the reaction, from the Government or parents or in the media, if they are seen to show weakness in response to unsatisfactory test scores.

In the past two years the Hong Kong Government has moved on to a second phase in its efforts to improve the quality of language education in primary and secondary schools. Having put the LPR in place, it has now set out specifications regarding subject matter knowledge and professional training. This latest initiative is the result of recommendations from a government advisory body known as SCOLAR (the Standing Committee on Language Education and Research) contained in a June 2003 report on language education.

The SCOLAR report contained a range of recommendations, among them a series of requirements 'to ensure that language teachers are adequately prepared for their work, i.e. proficient in the language they teach, well grounded in subject knowledge and acquainted with the latest theories and practices in language teaching and learning' (SCOLAR, 2003, p. 3). These requirements included meeting the LPR within the time frame set out by the Government, but they also went on to cover subject matter knowledge and professional training. From 2004-2005 new language teachers should have either a Bachelor of Education degree in the relevant language subject or a first degree plus a one-year full-time post-graduate professional qualification majoring in the relevant language subject. Those who do not hold the recommended qualifications should acquire them within three to five years of entering the profession. As part of this scheme, serving teachers are being encouraged to acquire these qualifications, with an incentive grant covering 50 per cent of the course fees.

This new set of requirements for language teachers has generally encountered less hostility than the LPR. The Government appears to have learnt some lessons from its mishandling of the LPR, particularly as regards the treatment of serving teachers. In the implementation of the SCOLAR report, serving teachers are being encouraged rather than required to obtain appropriate qualifications they lack, with the inducement of a generous incentive grant. There has been some criticism (for example, Grossman & Lai, 2004) that the recommendations may have a detrimental effect on primary schools, by focusing on one area of instruction (language) at the expense of

the others. The timing of the initiative is also perceived by teachers as less than ideal: Hong Kong teachers in recent years have had to cope with a continuous stream of curriculum innovations, each of which has increased workload and pressure. Against such a background, a generous incentive grant for CPD inevitably loses some of its attraction. In general, however, this latest Government initiative has been greeted relatively positively.

THE 'RELEVANT DEGREE' INDICATOR: A SMALL-SCALE STUDY

A recurrent phrase in the Hong Kong Government's memoranda on language proficiency and subject knowledge is 'relevant degree'. As noted earlier, possession of a relevant degree plus relevant professional training provides exemption from the Language Proficiency Requirement. It also exempts the holder from the recently introduced subject knowledge requirements.

In relation to the latter, it may seem reasonable to assume that possessing a relevant degree would be a reliable indicator of an adequate level of subject matter knowledge. However, the issue is not as simple as it might appear, in part because of the difficulty of deciding what constitutes a relevant degree: for example, is a degree in Translation or in English Literature relevant to the teaching of English Language?

The documentation issued by the Hong Kong Government makes clear that it considers both such degrees to be relevant. It defines 'relevant degree' as '... a recognised degree or higher degree with substantial components on the study of English and its use. In the main, this includes degrees specifically in the study of the English language (including English studies, English literature, and linguistics), degrees in education with specialisation in English, degrees in the communicative use of English and degrees in translation with English as one of the principal languages studied' (Hong Kong Government, 2004, p. 2). What is less clear is the extent to which there is a detailed analysis or quantification of the areas of subject matter knowledge taught in

those programmes, and how substantial the focus on English Language must be, or whether it is in practice merely sufficient for words such as 'English' or 'Linguistics' to appear in the title of the award.

In order to shed some light on the validity of the 'relevant degree' criterion in setting standards for the subject matter knowledge of teachers of EFL, a small-scale study was recently conducted. The main aim of the study was to address the following question:

- Do holders of 'relevant' first degrees have a higher level of English Language subject matter knowledge than holders of 'non-relevant' degrees?

A subsidiary question concerned holders of degrees that are relevant according to the Government criteria:

- Do holders of first degrees primarily focusing on Linguistics possess higher levels of English language subject matter knowledge than those whose degrees focused largely on other areas of English Studies?

The subjects in this study were 105 prospective teachers of English (including a handful of native speakers of English), who were towards the end of a one-year full-time postgraduate pre-service teacher education course. The research instrument was a test of Language Awareness, preceded by a brief questionnaire to elicit information about the subjects' first-degree studies. The Language Awareness test (see Andrews & McNeill, 2005, for further details) consisted of a 60-item Grammar component, made up of four tasks, and a parallel Vocabulary component. The Grammar component was based on Alderson, Clapham and Steel's test (see Alderson et al., 1996, 1997), which in turn drew on Bloor (1986).

The performance of the subjects on the test was compared in three ways. Based on the bio-data from the questionnaire, the subjects were placed in three groups:

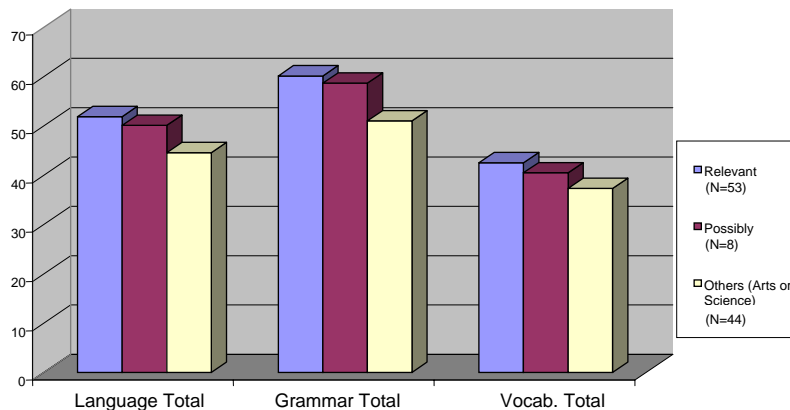
- Group 1 (n = 53), those with 'relevant' first degrees (in this case, defined as degrees in English, Linguistics or TEFL);
- Group 2 (n = 8), those with 'possibly relevant' first degrees (such as

Translation or Communication); and

- Group 3 (n = 44), those with non-relevant degrees according to the Hong Kong Government/SCOLAR criteria.

One-way ANOVA was used to compare the means of the three groups. As Figure 1 reveals, in the test as a whole and in each of the two components the mean scores were highest for Group 1 and lowest for Group 3. The difference between the means for Group 3 and those of the other two groups were statistically significant throughout (Overall test: $F = 12.013$, $p < .001$; Grammar component: $F = 12.270$, $p < .001$; Vocabulary component: $F = 4.422$, $p < .001$). The difference between the Group 1 and 2 means was not statistically significant, although in view of the small number of Group 2 subjects ($n = 8$), it would be unwise to draw too many conclusions from this.

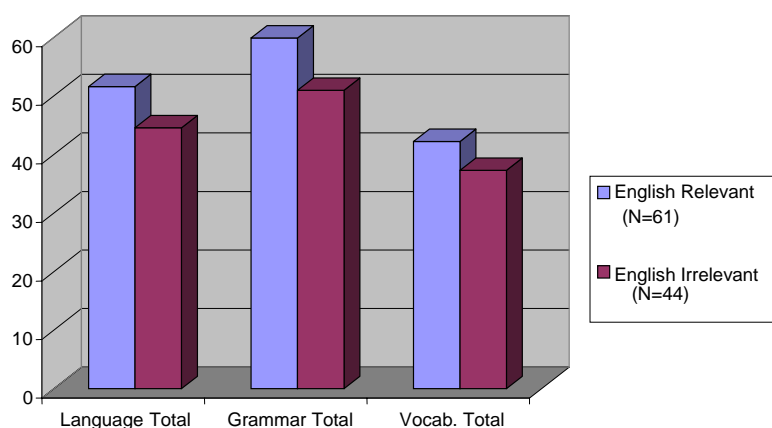
FIGURE 1
Subject of First Degree and LA Test Performance: Comparison 1
 (Subject of First Degree and Percentage Scores)



The first two groups were then combined so that the mean performance of those with ‘relevant’ degrees according to the Hong Kong Government/SCOLAR criteria could be compared with that of the holders of non-relevant degrees. A t-test was used to compare the means. As Figure 2 shows, the holders of ‘relevant’ degrees performed markedly better on the whole test and

on each of the two components, with the differences being statistically significant in each case (Overall test: $t = 4.876$, $p < .001$; Grammar component: $t = 4.956$, $p < .001$; Vocabulary component: $t = 2.914$, $p < .005$).

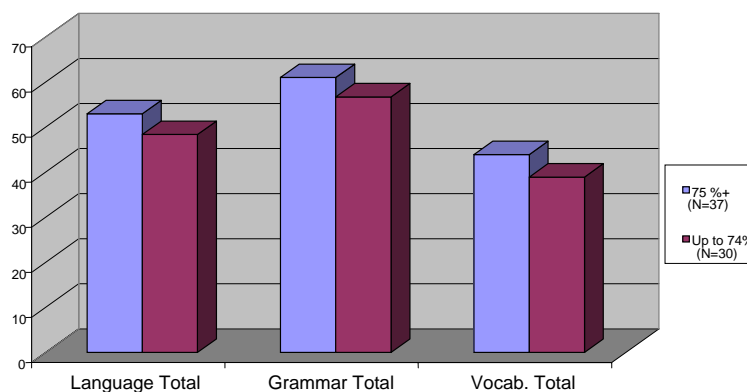
FIGURE 2
Subject of First Degree and LA Test Performance: Comparison
(Subject of First Degree and Percentage Scores)



Finally, the performance of those whose degrees had included some English was examined. In this case, the subjects included six with 'non-relevant' degrees, because they had all taken some English courses at university. For the purposes of comparison, the subjects were divided into two groups: those whose English studies consisted of at least 75 per cent Linguistics (Group 1, $n = 37$), and those for whom Linguistics made up less than 75 per cent of their English Studies (Group 2, $n = 30$). The means for the two groups were compared using a t-test. As Figure 3 indicates, Group 1 performed better overall, and on both components. The differences were all statistically significant (Overall test: $t = 2.749$, $p < .05$; Grammar component: $t = 2.135$, $p < .05$; Vocabulary component: $t = 2.653$, $p < .05$).

FIGURE 3

Proportion of Linguistics in First Degree and LA Test Performance
 (Percentage of English Components and Percentage Scores)



At first sight, these results would appear to provide some support for the Hong Kong Government's use of the possession of a 'relevant' degree as an indicator of an adequate level of subject matter knowledge. However, this begs a number of questions, both about the instrument used in this study (which is rather limited in scope) and about the levels of performance among those with arguably the most relevant degrees. Those subjects whose English first-degree studies comprised over 75 percent Linguistics may have scored higher than those with non-relevant degrees, for example. But whether their overall mean score of 52.95% reflects a professionally adequate level of subject matter knowledge is a matter that warrants much more rigorous and detailed investigation.

CONCLUSION

The paper has explored the issue of professional standards in TEFL, with specific reference to subject matter knowledge. It has examined the complexity of defining precisely what subject matter knowledge means in relation to teachers of EFL, drawing on the Teacher Language Awareness

(TLA) construct (see, for example, Andrews 2001, 2003) to argue that teacher professionalism entails the possession of adequate knowledge of the language, adequate knowledge about the language, and the ability to make effective use of such knowledge in pedagogical practice (the procedural dimension of TLA). The paper has gone on to outline the experiences in the Hong Kong context of attempting to set appropriate standards in the first two of those areas: language proficiency (knowledge of language) and content knowledge (knowledge about language). In both cases, as the paper has indicated, the Hong Kong experiences have had their problems. The attempt to 'benchmark' language teachers' proficiency in English generated extremely strong negative reactions among Hong Kong teachers when the LPAT examination was first introduced, and it continues to inspire hostility, particularly each time the latest LPAT results are announced. The more recent emphasis on subject matter knowledge has encountered less opposition, but it has drawn attention to the practical difficulties of identifying agreed indicators for the setting of standards. Although there is some evidence to suggest that holders of relevant degrees may have higher levels of subject matter knowledge than holders of non-relevant degrees, the validity of such indicators needs to be researched much more fully before they can be employed with any confidence. As for setting standards for the procedural dimension of TLA, this has not been explicitly addressed in the present paper (see Andrews, 2002, for some discussion of this issue). However, it would undoubtedly pose challenges, at both the theoretical and the practical levels.

If lessons are to be learnt from the Hong Kong experience, by any other society wrestling with similar concerns about professional standards in TEFL, they are probably the following.

Firstly, in any initiative relating to teacher professionalism, the emphasis should be on raising professional standards rather than merely on setting those standards. There is nothing inherently wrong with the Hong Kong Government's desire to ensure that teachers of EFL, particularly new teachers, possess adequate levels of language proficiency and subject matter knowledge. On the contrary, the Government should take some credit for

attempting to engage with such a controversial issue. However, the emphasis in Hong Kong, particularly with the LPAT examination, has been on setting standards rather than raising them, and serving teachers have generally perceived the approach as insensitive and punitive, penalising those who fail to reach the specified standard rather than providing them with encouragement to improve. As a result, the Government finds itself having to regain the trust of teachers of English, who have felt demoralised by the impact of the LPAT on their self-efficacy, and by its introduction at a time when their professional skills have been stretched to the limits by the requirement to cope with one major curriculum innovation after another.

Secondly, in any such initiative elsewhere, the Government would need to understand the importance of consulting and engaging the support of the relevant professional organisations in the development of strategies for improving professional standards in order to reach together an agreed, contextually appropriate approach to continuing professional development (CPD) for teachers of EFL. Such an approach would still need to involve the identification of appropriate professional standards, both to screen out unsuitable prospective entrants to the profession and to enable serving teachers to set personal goals for their CPD within an accepted framework. There would also probably need to be a combination of ‘carrot’ (inducement) and ‘stick’ (obligation): the carrot of financial and/or professional support to encourage serving teachers to engage in CPD and the stick of a requirement to take a course or courses within agreed dates. The key to success, however, would be for such strategies to be agreed with the teachers’ unions and professional bodies rather than being simply imposed ‘top-down’: there would need to be genuine consultation of stakeholders, honest engagement with the concerns of teachers’ representatives and total transparency.

Thirdly, the paper has not explicitly discussed the challenge of professional standards in the private sector, which is that much more complex because of the vast diversity of EFL provision in that domain. In order for this challenge to be addressed effectively within any society, there would almost certainly need to be some sort of regulatory system in place, aimed at providing a

measure of protection for the consumer. Under such a system, language schools would be required to seek official accreditation: a licence to operate. The criteria for accreditation would include locally appropriate requirements (agreed with the relevant stakeholders) regarding the professional standards of teachers employed by any licenced school. Once such a system was in place, the emphasis could be placed on raising standards in those schools rather than merely specifying a set of minimum requirements. A two-tier system of accreditation, for instance, with a marketable higher tier of approval for schools that fulfilled more exacting criteria (including criteria concerning teacher standards) might provide an incentive for private schools to invest in CPD programmes.

Finally, the issues of professional standards in TEFL cannot and should not be ignored, however complex and unpalatable they may be. With societies becoming increasingly aware of the role of English in their economic and technological development, there is an understandable concern in those societies to ensure that responsibility for the teaching of English is in good hands, and that teachers are as well prepared as possible. Although there are conceptual and practical difficulties associated with the specification of professional standards, the debate about the nature of such standards and our expectations regarding such standards is an important one. Indeed, I would argue that it is central to our understanding of what we do as teachers. In recent years, there has been considerable emphasis in education generally and in TEFL specifically on the learner and on learning: an emphasis that should be applauded, since our goal as teachers is to promote effective learning. However, at the same time, we should not overlook the significance of the potential impact of teacher professionalism, with subject matter knowledge at its core, upon the learners and upon learning. For that reason, the issue of professional standards in TEFL should continue to exercise our minds.

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