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THE PERCEIVED CHARACTERISTICS OF EFL TEACHERS' PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCY IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

This article discusses an internal factor that is believed to have a significant influence on EFL teachers' quality, that is teachers' perception on EFL teachers' professional characteristics. This article aims to investigate EFL teachers' perceptions on the characteristics of professional EFL teachers and to investigate whether teaching experience differentiates their perceptions. The study was conducted in Cimahi, West Java. The subjects were 119 EFL senior and junior high school teachers from 31 schools. Subjects were chosen through cluster-random sampling. Data were taken through a survey. Data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. The study used 13 dependent variables to describe teachers' professional characteristics of Professional Competency. To describe the subjects' characteristics, respondents were grouped into categories which become the independent variables (Inexperienced Teachers, Relatively Experienced Teachers, and Very Experienced Teachers). To test whether teaching experience differentiates teachers' characteristics, ANOVA Test was employed. The results of the study show that teachers have positive responses to the characteristics described in the 13 variables and that teaching experience differentiates teachers' perceptions towards professional characteristics of EFL teachers.

(Key words: EFL Teachers, Perception, Professional Comptency, and Characteristics)

Introduction

Teachers' competency has been a crucial issue in education as successful teaching happens if the teachers are competent (Alatis, 2007; Whitehurst, 2002). According to Law of Teachers and Lecturers, teachers are acknowledged as the ones who directly deal with the transferring of knowledge, skills, and attitudes to students. Considering that teachers are the ones who play the most direct roles in the process of education, the Indonesian Government has acknowledged teaching

as a profession (Law No. 14 /2005). Thus, teaching, as a profession, entails that the job can only be handled or be done by a person who holds qualification standards of competency.

Competencies that a teacher must possess, according to this Law, comprise professional competency, pedagogical competency, personal competency, and social competency (Government Regulation No. 19/2005, Article 28:3). On professional competency, a teacher should be knowledgeable on the subject matter; on pedagogical competency, a professional teacher should be able to manage students' learning process; on personal competency, he or she must have good characters, show high moral principles and wisdom, and become a good model for his/her learners; and on social competency, he or she must be able to communicate and interact effectively and efficiently with learners, with other teachers, with students' parents, and with surrounding societies (Explanation of Article 10, Law No. 14/2005). Of the four categories of competency, professional competency is believed to be the most contributing aspect to the success of learning (Suherdi, 2007). This is generally accepted as professional competency deals with knowing the subject matter.

A number of studies on teachers' characteristics have been conducted (Beishuizen et al., 2001; Grierson, 2006; Moskowitz, 1976; Noble and Odgerel, 2011). Beishuizen et al. (2001) and Grierson (2006) found that good teachers were perceived as teachers who have good personalities such as being patient, humorous, calm, and honest; Noble and Odgerel (2011) found that good teachers were perceived as teachers who are knowledgeable, smart, caring, nurturing, responsible, hard-working, diligent, fair, honest, and self-confident, while Moskowitz (1976) found that good teachers performed outstanding verbal and non-verbal behaviors, have good personal attitudes, and have ability to present materials.

Although these studies have found a number of professional teachers' characteristics, the findings have not revealed specific characteristics of EFL teachers. Therefore, the previous studies have left the following problems:

- Insufficient information on the characteristics of professional EFL teachers.
- Impractical findings on the characteristic indicators of teachers' professionalism
- Minimum involvement of EFL teachers on the study of teachers' professionalism.

Theoretical Review

The Nature of Perception and Its Influence on Teachers' Behaviors

The nature of term perception has been discussed by a number of scholars (Babitsi, 2009; Gould, 2003; Boeree, 2008; Taylor et al., 2009; and Woods, 1996). According to Babitski (2009:1) perception is "the process of attaining awareness or understanding of sensory information", while Gould (2003:1) defines perception as "the subsequent selection, organization, and interpretation of sensory input". The two definitions imply that perception is an active process of understanding, organizing, and making sense of input from environment.

Making perception about others is not a simple process (Boeree, 2008; Taylor et al; 2009). It involves a number of aspects as senses (seeing, hearing, taste, touch, and smell), mental, and personal objectives. According to Taylor et al. (2009), in making perception about other persons, we need to consider a number of aspects: first, our perception about or of others is not derived from complete information; second, some characteristics are more identifiable than the others; third, perception about or of others is related to behavior; fourth, our perception of others is triggered by stimuli coming from the person being observed; fifth, perception is a mental (cognitive) process; and finally, our perception of others is related to our needs and objectives.

This means that when someone perceives others, he or she tries to construct meaning from the persons being perceived and his perception about others may have strong influence on what he or she believes to exist or to be true. The beliefs, then, may construct his conception. This can mean that a teacher's conceptions on professional teachers, may be influenced by the behaviors of other teachers being perceived. That is to say that when one perceives stimuli that indicate the characteristics of professional EFL teachers, then he or she puts his or her perception into belief which in turn becomes the basis of his/her conception of what qualities professional teachers should possess.

According to Woods (1996), a teacher's conception on what characterizes professional teachers becomes the basis of her or his teaching behaviors. This can be concluded that in the daily activities, teachers are believed to act on the basis of what they believe to be true. Thus, studies on what teachers believe on professional teachers become important in order to understand the triggers of teachers' classroom decision-making. Thus, it can be concluded that other teachers can function as stimuli that form a teacher's perception and

when a teacher perceives other teachers as professional teachers, his/her positive perception may drive him/her to behave accordingly. To say in other words, a teacher's classroom behaviors are resulted from his/her beliefs which are based on his/her perception of others.

Teaching as a Profession

In understanding teaching as a profession, one cannot separate teaching profession from the basic concepts of other professions. The term 'profession' is a broad concept that involves many aspects (Sanusi et al., in Saud 2008; Shulman, in Bransford et al., 2005; Hamied, 2009; Sockett, 2009; Banks et al., 2005, and Kaufman, 2009). Sanusi et al. (in Saud, 2008) elaborate five terms related to the concept of profession which include the terms *profession* which means that the job requires expertise, *professional* which refers to the performance of the person carrying out the job as required by the profession, *professionalism* which refers to the commitment of members of the profession in improving their ability, *professionality* which refers to the attitudes of the members of the profession, and *professionalization* which refers to process of professional development to meet professional standards.

Hamied (2009) mentions a number of characteristics of a profession. According to Hamied, a profession must maintain a significant social function in communities and its members must have expertise which is gained from accountable education or training, uphold high discipline and ethical conduct, and gain income from the profession.

With regard to teaching as a profession, Sockett (2009) argues that teaching profession demands teaching dispositions from the teachers which include ethical and moral dispositions. Sockett adds that a profession is not merely an ordinary job, but it requires dedication.

As one kind of professions, teaching profession also holds the six general principles. However, there are specific aspects that are attributed to teaching profession. In discussing teaching as a profession, Bransford et al. (2005) mention three aspects that make up 'a vision of professional practice'. These three aspects are: *knowledge of learners and their development in social contexts* that includes the knowledge of learning, human development, and language; *knowledge of subject matter & curriculum goals* which includes the knowledge of educational goals and purposes for skills, content, subject matter; and *knowledge of teaching* which includes knowledge of content and content pedagogy, teaching diverse learners, assessment, and classroom management. Of the three aspects, knowledge of subject matter is an aspect that directly

deals with the professional competency of teachers.

According to Bransford et al. (2005), a teacher should be prepared with is knowledge of subject matter. The knowledge of subject matter includes the knowledge of subject being taught. The knowledge of subject matter is the scholarly knowledge that a teacher has gained from schooling as well as from individual knowledge development. Grossman et al. (2005) and Darling-Hammond & Berry (2006) also mention the importance of knowledge of subject matters for teachers. According to Grossman et al., teachers should possess deep knowledge of the subjects they teach. Similarly, Darling-Hammond & Berry (2006) also acknowledge the importance of knowledge of subject matters. According to Darling-Hammond and Berry, a teacher's knowledge of subject matter has a significant role on students' achievement.

As knowledge of subject matter is crucial for teachers' professionalism, it is important to discuss the parameters that can best describe knowing subject matter for language teachers.. Brown (2001:430) identifies indicators that describe professional competency of language teachers, as follows:

- Understands the linguistic systems of English phonology, grammar, and discourse
- Comprehensively grasps basic principles of language learning and teaching
- Has fluent competence in speaking, writing, listening to, and reading English
- Knows through experience what it is like to learn a foreign language
- Understands the close connection between language and culture
- Keeps up with the field through regular reading and conference/workshop attendance

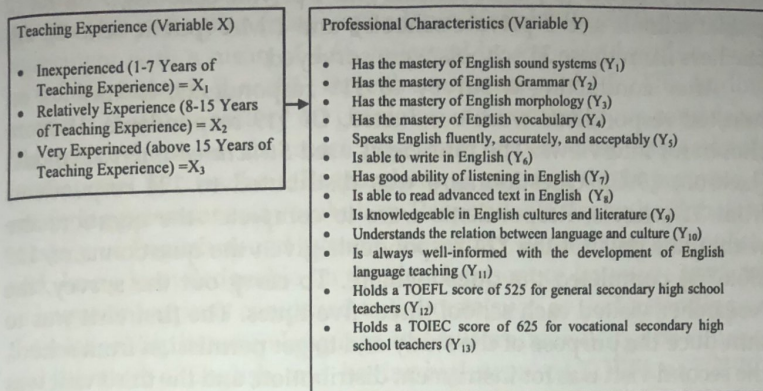
Research Assumptions, Research Variables, Research Hypothesis

Based on the problems and the theoretical review that have been discussed, the research assumptions and research variables were designed as follows:

Research Assumptions:

- Teachers act on the basis of what they believe to be true, unless the conditions say otherwise.
- Teachers' belief is, in most cases, derived from their perceptions
- Teaching experience differentiates teachers' perceptions

Research Variables



Research Hypotheses

H_1 = Teachers have positive perceptions towards professional characteristics as mentioned in Variable Y.

H_2 = Experienced teachers' perceptions towards the characteristics of Professional Competency are significantly different from those of inexperienced teachers.

Research Methodology

This study was designed in a quantitative framework. Data were taken through a survey, and interviews. The survey data were taken through questionnaire. The survey data become the primary data and were used as the basis for interviews. The survey data were employed to make sure that data gathered were sufficient and valid, while the interviews were aimed at gathering data of respondents' reasons underlying their responses to the survey questionnaire in order to achieve in-depth analysis of the findings and validating the quantitative data findings (Jackson, 1995).

The total samples in this study were 119 English teachers of secondary schools in Cimahi, West Java-Indonesia. The sampling was formulated using a combination of multi-stage area sample and proportional random sampling (Jackson, 1995), by considering a number of school characteristics (level of school, status of school, number of school, location of school, and classification of school). Accordingly, the surveyed schools consisted of 11 SMPs (8 public

schools and 3 private schools), 3 MTs (1 public school and 2 private schools), 9 SMAs (5 public schools and 4 private schools), 7 SMKs (2 public schools and 5 private schools), and 1 MA (public school). All teachers from those 31 schools were surveyed.

After conducting a survey to 119 respondents, interviews on selected respondents were conducted. Of 119 respondents, 10 were chosen for interviews. The interviews used *Structured-Interview* model (Jackson, 1995). Questionnaire was distributed to 124 respondents from 31 schools. Respondents were to complete the questionnaire within one day. Of the 124 respondents given the questionnaire, 119 (95.67%) completed the questionnaire. To carry out the survey, the researcher visited each school three -five times. The first visit was to introduce the purpose of the study and to get permission from school, the second visit was for instrument distribution, and the third visit was for collecting the completed questionnaire.

Data were analyzed using descriptive statistic for general tendency and ANOVA Test for variance data analysis. Teachers' responses to the findings were used to enrich the discussion of the findings on the general description and on the statistical test. This was to provide a thick description of the findings.

The Findings

This section summarizes the finding on the perceptions of EFL teachers' characteristics of Professional Competency. The finding is presented in Figure 1 below.

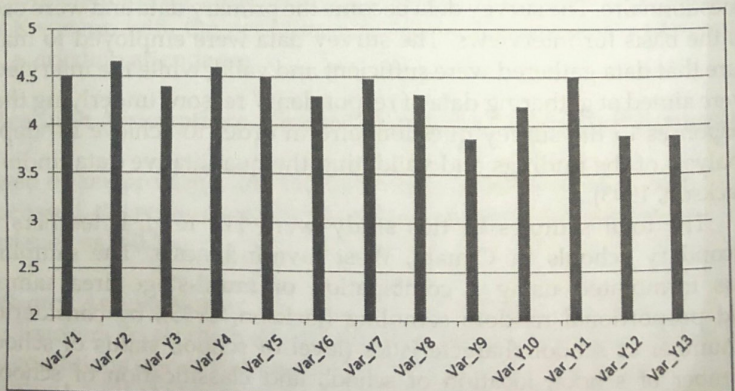


Figure 1: Mean of Each Variable (Var-Y1 to Var_Y13)

Figure 1 describes the data finding of variable 1 to variable 13 of Professional Competency. The figure shows that overall, all variables get positive perception from respondents. Variable 2 gets the strongest agreement with a mean of 4.66, followed by variable 4 with a mean of 4.6. Variables 1, 5, and 11 have the same mean of 4.5. This finding suggests that the mastery on grammar and vocabulary is considered the respondents as the most important aspect that characterizes professional EFL teachers. Respondents stressed on the importance of mastering grammar and vocabulary. Respondents also uphold that the mastery of English sound system, the ability of speaking in English, and being knowledgeable on the development of language teaching as important aspects compared to the rests such as understanding on the relationship between language and culture, knowledge on cultures and literature of English, and having high score on TOEFL or TOEIC.

This finding confirms the arguments by Stewart et al. (1985) and Cahyono & Widiati (2008). According to Stewart et al., 'words are the basic medium of communication' (p.45). Similarly, Cahyono and Widiati also claim that "vocabulary, in addition to grammar and pronunciation, is one language elements considered necessary for language mastery' (p.1). This finding also confirms the importance of grammar in teaching foreign language (Brown, 2001). Here, Brown argues that grammar is one of three interconnected dimensions of language (grammar, semantics, and pragmatics). Thus, the teaching of vocabulary and grammar is an integral part of communicative language teaching. According to the respondents, mastering vocabulary and grammar is important for two reasons: first, the mastery on the two aspects is the key to mastering other skills, and second, the mastery of both aspects shows a teacher's intellect. From these arguments, it can be said that most teachers still uphold the importance of teaching explicit grammar and vocabulary. Teachers believe that the teaching of English should take into account the central role of the two aspects of language (word and structure) in order to support other skills. From the findings, it can also be said that teachers still believe the effectiveness of teaching vocabulary and grammar explicitly. The lowest agreement was given to variable 12 (Holds high score on TOEFL for general secondary high school English teachers) and and variable 13 (Holds high score of TOEIC for vocational secondary high school English teachers).

The Results of Variance Analysis

The result of ANOVA test of each variable is presented in Table 1 below.

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Var_1	Between Groups	1.131	2	.565	1.909	.153
	Within Groups	34.365	116	.296		
	Total	35.496	118			
Var_2	Between Groups	1.742	2	.871	4.019	.021
	Within Groups	25.132	116	.217		
	Total	26.874	118			
Var_3	Between Groups	7.295	2	3.647	10.609	.000
	Within Groups	39.882	116	.344		
	Total	47.176	118			
Var_4	Between Groups	1.040	2	.520	1.889	.156
	Within Groups	31.951	116	.275		
	Total	32.992	118			
Var_5	Between Groups	1.041	2	.521	2.104	.127
	Within Groups	28.707	116	.247		
	Total	29.748	118			
Var_6	Between Groups	1.167	2	.583	1.795	.171
	Within Groups	37.707	116	.325		
	Total	38.874	118			
Var_7	Between Groups	2.279	2	1.140	4.208	.017
	Within Groups	31.418	116	.271		
	Total	33.697	118			
Var_8	Between Groups	2.767	2	1.384	4.573	.012
	Within Groups	35.098	116	.303		
	Total	37.866	118			
Var_9	Between Groups	1.885	2	.942	2.315	.103
	Within Groups	47.224	116	.407		
	Total	49.109	118			
Var_10	Between Groups	.496	2	.248	.651	.523
	Within Groups	44.143	116	.381		
	Total	44.639	118			
Var_11	Between Groups	1.468	2	.734	2.127	.124
	Within Groups	40.028	116	.345		
	Total	41.496	118			
Var_12	Between Groups	1.159	2	.579	1.285	.281
	Within Groups	52.304	116	.451		
	Total	53.462	118			
Var_13	Between Groups	1.519	2	.759	1.560	.215
	Within Groups	56.465	116	.487		
	Total	57.983	118			

Table 1: The result of ANOVA test of each variable of Professional Competency by Teaching Experience

Table 1 suggests that by teaching experience there is significant mean difference on variable 2 (Has the mastery of English grammar), on variable 3 (Has the mastery of English morphology), on variable 7 (Has good ability of listening in English), and on variable 8 (Is able to

read advanced text in English) as it has the value of $p < 0.05$. A further hypothesis test for those variables was employed using Post ANOVA test as can be seen from Table 2 below.

Dependent Variable	(I) T.Exper	(J) T.Exper	Mean Difference (I-J)	Std. Error	Sig.	95% Confidence Interval	
						Lower Bound	Upper Bound
Var_2	Inexperienced	Relatively Experienced	-.33236*	.11860	.006	-.5673	-.0975
		Very Experienced	-.17628	.11486	.128	-.4038	.0512
	Relatively Experienced	Inexperienced	.33236*	.11860	.006	.0975	.5673
		Very Experienced	.15608	.09594	.106	-.0339	.3461
	Very Experienced	Inexperienced	.17628	.11486	.128	-.0512	.4038
		Relatively Experienced	-.15608	.09594	.106	-.3461	.0339
Var_3	Inexperienced	Relatively Experienced	-.68798*	.14940	.000	-.9839	-.3921
		Very Experienced	-.42949*	.14470	.004	-.7161	-.1429
	Relatively Experienced	Inexperienced	.68798*	.14940	.000	.3921	.9839
		Very Experienced	.25850*	.12086	.035	.0191	.4979
	Very Experienced	Inexperienced	.42949*	.14470	.004	.1429	.7161
		Relatively Experienced	-.25850*	.12086	.035	-.4979	-.0191
Var_7	Inexperienced	Relatively Experienced	-.35950*	.13260	.008	-.6221	-.0969
		Very Experienced	-.13141	.12843	.308	-.3858	.1230
	Relatively Experienced	Inexperienced	.35950*	.13260	.008	.0969	.6221
		Very Experienced	.22809*	.10727	.036	.0156	.4406
	Very Experienced	Inexperienced	.13141	.12843	.308	-.1230	.3858
		Relatively Experienced	-.22809*	.10727	.036	-.4406	-.0156
Var_8	Inexperienced	Relatively Experienced	-.42345*	.14016	.003	-.7010	-.1459
		Very Experienced	-.28526*	.13574	.038	-.5541	-.0164
	Relatively Experienced	Inexperienced	.42345*	.14016	.003	.1459	.7010
		Very Experienced	.13819	.11338	.225	-.0864	.3628
	Very Experienced	Inexperienced	.28526*	.13574	.038	.0164	.5541
		Relatively Experienced	-.13819	.11338	.225	-.3628	.0864

Table 2: The result of Post ANOVA test of indicators on variable 1 (Professional Competency) based on teaching experience (*. The mean difference is significant at the 0.05 level.)

Table 2 above suggests that there is significant difference of mean of variable 2 Professional Competency by teaching experience, between Relatively Experienced teachers (4.7907) and Inexperienced teachers (4.4583), while for other groups there is no significant difference of

mean. On variable 3 there is significant difference of mean by teaching experience between Relatively Experienced (4.6047) and Inexperienced (3.9167), between Very Experienced (4.3462) and Inexperienced (3.9167), and between Relatively Experienced (4.6047) and Very Experienced (4.3462). On variable 7 there is significant difference of mean by teaching experience between Relatively Experienced (4.6512) and Inexperienced (4.2917). On variable 8 there is significant difference by teaching experience between Relatively Experienced (4.4651) and Inexperienced (4.0417), between Very Experienced (4.3269) and Inexperienced (4.0417), and between Very Experienced (4.3269) and Relatively Experienced (4.4651).

There are a number of reasons for relatively experience teachers and very experienced teachers to have stronger agreement on the characteristics described in each variable. First, experienced teachers have gained more practical knowledge and experience than inexperienced teachers. Thus, they appreciate their knowledge and experience. Such a reason was expressed by a number of teachers when interviewed. First, senior teachers are more experienced in teaching practices because they are quite well-equipped with background on how to cope with problems faced. Novice teachers have less experience on teaching practices so they do not have enough knowledge to overcome the problems faced. Experienced teachers have acquired more knowledge and therefore, they are well-informed.

To discuss the mean difference based on teaching experience between inexperienced teacher group, relatively experienced teachers group, and very experienced teacher group, a figure showing the variable whose mean is significantly different is presented, as follows:

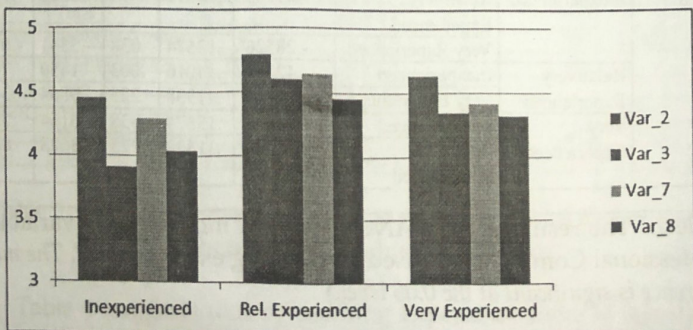


Figure 2: Mean difference of variable 2, variable 3, variable 7, and variable 8 of Professional Competency by Teaching Experience.

Figure 2 presents the significant mean difference of variable 1 (Has the mastery of English grammar), variable 3 (Has the mastery of English morphology), variable 7 (Has good ability of listening in English), and variable 8 (Is able to read advanced text in English) based on teaching experience. Of 13 variables 4 of them have significant mean difference. Thus, 30% of the variables of Personal Competency have significant mean difference. The figure shows that in all of the four variables, relatively experienced teachers group (with teaching experienced between 8 to 15 years) has the strongest agreement on the importance of the four variables of Professional Competency. The inexperienced teachers group has the lowest agreement, and the very experienced teachers group is in the middle between inexperienced and relatively experienced teachers groups. This means that the strongest teachers' belief on the importance of the four variables is the domain of the middle group.

When teachers have been teaching for more than 16 years their agreement on the four characteristics gets lower. In other words, it can be said that the idealism of getting more knowledge on the four variables is stronger for the middle group than for the other two groups. However, the difference of mean between relatively experienced teachers group and very experienced teachers group is not significant statistically. This means that the decrease on their agreement from relatively experienced group to very experienced group is not as much as the increase from inexperienced group to relatively experienced group. This is congruent to the opinion of a number of teachers where very experienced teachers are more concerned on the building characteristics that belong to attitude as respecting student's individual background and understanding student's individual achievement.

Conclusions

In brief, the results of the study can be summed up as follows:

- First, in general, teachers have positive perceptions on the 13 characteristics of Professional Competency used in this study. This signifies that the 13 variables are important for teachers' professionalism standards. These variables can be used as the basis for teacher professional development on Professional Competency.
- Second, teachers believe that *the mastery of English grammar* is the most important aspect, followed by *the mastery of English vocabulary*, while *having knowledge of English culture and literature* is perceived as the least important aspect of professional EFL teachers'

- characteristics. This suggests that most teachers focus on students' mastery of grammar and vocabulary.
- Third, teaching experience differentiates teachers' perceptions degree in which experienced teachers have more positive perceptions than inexperienced teachers. This finding confirms that teachers' experience has an important contribution on teachers' professional characteristics.

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