Research Article

Embedding L2 Proficiency Pedagogy into ESOL Teacher Education

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Article Info	Abstract
	This article considers an exploratory study designed to understand the relevancy of a course unit on L2 proficiency to pre-service ESOL teachers' understanding of the nature of the concept of proficiency and their awareness of strategies for developing multilingual learners' proficiency in English in their own instructional contexts. The article begins with an exploration of the concept of proficiency and its relevancy for ESOL teacher education and summarizes previous studies concerning the development of L2 proficiency in English among language learners and language educators. The article then describes the logistics of the course unit on L2 proficiency and the data collection and analysis procedures for the study. Finally, the article reviews preliminary findings emerging from the study and proposes avenues for further research along with recommendations for ESOL teacher educators.

1. Introduction

One of the more fundamental concepts in second language acquisition is the notion of proficiency. From the outset of the field's history, scholars have attempted to better understand the nature of proficiency along with the interplay of various cognitive, linguistic, and situational factors that may influence the development of learners' proficiency in the target language. During the first half of the twentieth century, educators initially tended to focus on the advancement of students' grammatical awareness of important features of the language (e.g., the Grammar-Translation Method the Audiolingual Method). Later, researchers came to recognize that grammatical competence was an important but insufficient factor for learners to initiate and sustain language interactions with other interlocutors, ultimately leading to the advent of a variety of approaches that focus on the expansion of learners' abilities to both comprehend and express ideas (i.e., Communicative Language Teaching). In a similar vein, Liu (2015) contends that earlier methods tended to be rule-focused in the sense that emphasis was placed on students' mastery of specific features of the language but that later approaches were more meaning-focused by promoting learners' ability to convey their thoughts to others and discern messages transmitted by others. Such competence necessarily

involves students' access to linguistic input that is within the range of their comprehensibility (Krashen, 1985) along with opportunities for them to produce output by imparting and sharing their thinking and reasoning (Swain, 1985).

Despite the foundational role of proficiency in SLA, however, few scholars have attempted to define the term operationally (Nunan, 1986). Nevertheless, there have been several attempts to understand the mechanics and ramifications of the construct. For instance, Chomsky (1965) makes the distinction between competence, or "the speaker-hearer's knowledge of his language" (p. 4) and performance, or "the actual use of language in concrete situations" (p. 4). In a similar vein, Canale and Swain (1980) maintain that competence involves the "knowledge of grammar and other aspects of language" (p. 3) while performance consists of "the realization of [such] competencies and their interaction in the actual production and comprehension of utterances" (p. 6). In essence, competence has often been understood as a given student's knowledge about the L2, while performance has been conceptualized as the ability to use the language successfully in interpersonal encounters. For example, Canale and Swain (1980) define communicative competence as "the relationship and interaction between grammatical competence, or knowledge of the rules of grammar, and sociolinguistic competence, or knowledge of the rules of language use" (p. 6). These definitions have centered on the notion that competence involves one's awareness and understanding of the essential grammatical rules and linguistic concepts related to the target language to the exclusion of one' ability to utilize this information in actual practice. However, rather than viewing competence and performance as two distinct and separate phenomena, scholars have more recently affirmed that language proficiency involves both learners' understanding of various grammatical/linguistic features of the target language and their capacity to utilize such knowledge when communicating with others. For example, Savignon (1990) contends that communicative competence involves "the ability of L2 learners to interact with other speakers, to make meaning, as distinct from their ability to perform on discrete-point tests of grammatical knowledge" (p. 209). Likewise, Renandya et al. (2018) affirm that language proficiency consists of "one's ability to use language for a variety of communicative purposes" (p. 618). These explanations thus confirm that proficiency in fact consists of not only students' understandings of various characteristics of the language but also their ability to effectively convey and comprehend oral/written texts in the language. In essence, proficiency necessarily involves both competence and performance in the target language. For instance, Harsch (2017) argues that proficiency involves "being able to *do* something with the language…as well as knowing *about* it [language]" (p. 250; emphasis in original).

A recent extension of these ideas is the identification and recognition of three interrelated concepts linked to the notion of proficiency, namely, complexity, accuracy, and fluency (CAF). Complexity refers to the richness and sophistication of students' language performance, or "the ability to use a wide and varied range of sophisticated structures and vocabulary in the L2" (Housen et al., 2012, p. 2); accuracy pertains to

the exactness and precision of their linguistic output, or "the ability to produce target-like and error-free language" (Housen et al., 2012, p. 2); and fluency concerns the eloquence and smoothness of their grammatical production, or "the ability to produce the L2 with native-like rapidity, pausing, hesitation, or reformulation" (Housen et al., 2012, p. 2). Learners' performance in the target language should therefore exhibit the meticulous and effortless usage of multiple and varied grammatical structures and vocabulary words in accordance with their current proficiency level. Likewise, Skehan (2018) posits that educational contexts should support learners in expanding their usage of more complicated language features as correctly and fluidly as possible. These three constructs have been utilized for a variety of purposes over the years, including (but not limited to) definitions for students' oral and written production as well as criteria for language growth and development (Housen & Kuiken, 2009).

One additional consideration relates to the abilities that compose L2 proficiency along with the relationships among these constituent elements. Although learners' L2 performance is often conceptualized in terms of the four language domains (i.e., listening, speaking, reading, and writing) and have traditionally been viewed as separate and distinct competencies, scholars have more recently understood the complementary and symbiotic nature of this linguistic dexterity. For example, Billings and Roberts (2014) assert that "reading, writing, speaking, and listening are interconnected skills that develop synergistically" (p. 33), suggesting that advancement in one domain frequently implies simultaneous growth in one or more other areas. Furthermore, the linguistic interdependence hypothesis (Cummins, 1979) states that a given person's competence in the target language is reliant to some extent on their level of linguistic dexterity in their home language(s), thus further emphasizing the potentially coordinated and reciprocal nature of L2 proficiency.

The previous discussion therefore accentuates the importance of advancing learners' proficiency in the target language in order to extend their understanding of the linguistic system of the language, their familiarity with techniques and strategies for engaging successfully with others, and their ability to implement this knowledge when participating in interpersonal exchanges.

2. Literature Review

L2 proficiency has been studied in a variety of institutional contexts for diverse purposes. This section details an array of studies that have explored the construct of proficiency in primary, secondary, and tertiary EFL/ESL contexts involving participants as learners and as educators along with the methodological gaps that the current study attempts to address.

2.1. Language Learners

Numerous studies have examined the development of students' language proficiency in English in assorted domains at a multitude of levels. For instance, Burns et al. (2016) investigated the relevancy of

specifically-targeted reading interventions on multilingual learners' reading scores. Participants in the research included over two hundred second- and third-grade ESL students attending three primary schools located in the midwestern United States who initially scored low on the on the Assessing Comprehension and Communication in English State-to-State (ACCESS) test in reading. The interventions consisted of additional instructional and practice for these students in the areas of fluency, phonics, and vocabulary. Analysis of the results of the study demonstrated that, with respect to the rate of reading words per minute correctly, participants with the lowest reading scores before the administration of the interventions exhibited the highest gains in this area compared to students in higher proficiency groups, suggesting that educators and administrators should not necessarily wait until learners possess a minimal level of reading proficiency in English before initiating specific interventions.

Fu et al. (2022) outline an investigation in which the researchers explored the contributions of digital storytelling on the development of EFL learners' speaking proficiency in English. Participants in the study included one hundred first-year students enrolled in a practical English course offered at a postsecondary institution in Taiwan. During the two-credit, eighteen-week course, students assigned to the control group produced their own stories that were between three and six minutes in length through either audio or video media, while those in the control group utilized the digital tool Toonastic to create and digitally record their own stories of similar length. The authors' hypothesis was that participants in the experimental group who composed their stories digitally would demonstrate a higher speaking proficiency level in English at the conclusion of the study due to, among other possible factors, the visual affordances and scaffolding that would be unavailable to those learners in the control group, which would likely increase their engagement in the story creation process. Data for the study were collected via pre- and post-tests assessing students' speaking proficiency in English, learning logs in which participants documented their processes for constructing and designing their stories, and a post-intervention survey which learners in the experimental group indicated their perceptions concerning the relevancy of the usability of the digital app and the contribution of the app to their engagement level and speaking proficiency. Findings from the study indicate that participants in the experimental group demonstrated noticeable gains in both fluency and language use in comparison with those in the control group, who exhibited a slight decrease in both of these areas at the conclusion of the study. Additionally, students consisted reported that the Toonastic app allowed them to express themselves both creatively and linguistically in ways that traditional class activities in listening and speaking did not allow them to. The authors thus conclude that digital storytelling is one viable mechanism for promoting the development of multilingual learners' speaking proficiency.

Hong (2016) reports on an investigation which attempted to measure the impact of specific listening tasks on EFL students' proficiency in English not only in relation to listening but also with respect to all four language domains as well. Participants in the study included twenty-six students attending a secondary

school in rural Malaysia. The six listening activities were selected from the Learn English / British Council website, were designed for learners at approximately the intermediate proficiency level (B1-B2) as described by the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) scale, and were focused on expanding students' listening competence in multiple areas on a variety of everyday topics through pre-listening, during-listening, and post-listening tasks. Data for the investigation were collected via a focus-group questionnaire survey, a pre- and post-set of sample language proficiency tests from the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) website regarding listening and speaking, and observational notes taken by the researcher concerning participants' physical and verbal responses to the listening activities. Results of the study confirm that the activities not only facilitated students' proficiency in listening but also in reading and writing as well. The author argues that the correlation between the development of participants' listening and reading skills during the study may be due to, among other factors, the receptive nature of both language domains along with need for exposure to authentic input in the target language. Additionally, the connection between listening and writing proficiency may be a result of the evolution of their aural/oral skills, which serve as the basis for the subsequent advancement of their writing abilities in the target language. In the final analysis, the author concludes that, while focusing solely on the expansion of students' listening skills is indeed important, it is also essential to concentrate on growth with respect to all of the language domains on account of the interdependent and synergistic nature of these areas. Consequently, "teachers should not focus on one of the four language skill[s] [for] the sacrifice of the others. Instead, teachers should integrate [all] four language skills in the classroom…from the very beginning" (p. 26).

Finally, Raoofi et al. (2017) summarize an investigation which aimed to identify the relevancy of strategic instruction regarding the use of writing strategies and the development of multilingual students' writing proficiency in English. Participants in the study included approximately three hundred ESL students enrolled in an English writing class offered at a postsecondary institution located in Malaysia. During the study, learners responded to an inventory adapted by the authors consisting of Likert-scale items designed to collect information on their use of particular strategies when writing in English with respect to five distinct categories: affective (one's emotional/psychological state), cognitive (one's mental processes), effort regulation (managing and controlling one's behavior), metacognitive (awareness of one's own learning), and social (one's interactions with others). Additionally, students completed two writing activities taken from the Malaysian University English Test (MUET). Data for the study were collected during class time and were subsequently analyzed using descriptive statistics and via ANOVA. Findings from the study demonstrate that participants frequently utilized strategies from all five language learning strategy categories, particularly with respect to effort regulation and metacognition, with social and affective strategies being employed the least. Additionally, students with a higher level of proficiency in English writing reported that they tended to use effort regulation and metacognitive strategies at a much more regular rate

than those at lower levels of writing proficiency. The authors ultimately contend that instructors should not only familiarize learners with a variety of learning strategies they could potentially incorporate into their own writing processes but should also provide them with multiple opportunities to "try out" these techniques and identify those which work best for them and under which conditions.

Overall, these studies clearly point to the need to intentionally and strategically develop multilingual learners' L2 proficiency in numerous ways along with the importance of both selectively focusing on each language skill on an individual basis and the probability that expanding students' proficiency in one language domain will likely impact the development of their competence in one or more other areas as well.

2.2. Language Educators

In addition to examining the development of language learners' proficiency in English, multiple researchers have investigated the role proficiency plays in language educator preparation as well. For instance, Chambliss (2012) explores the relationship between teachers' oral language proficiency and their perceived effectiveness as language instructors. The author contends that, according to the current literature in the field, it is commonly accepted that a given educator's speaking ability in the target language is a relatively accurate estimation of their instructional ability in the classroom and that, across multiple states in the United States, one requirement is that pre-service teachers achieve a minimum rating of either intermediate high or advanced low according to the proficiency guidelines established by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL, 2024). The guidelines distinguish five levels of language proficiency (novice, intermediate, advanced, superior, and distinguished), with the first three levels further separated into three distinct categories (low, mid, and high). Thus, an ACTFL rating of intermediate high or advanced low would roughly correspond to the B1-B2 levels on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (ACTFL, n.d.). Although research has convincingly shown that a crucial element for the development of students' language proficiency is receiving authentic comprehensible input in the target language, the author cites a number of studies that demonstrate that prospective language teachers have difficulty achieving the requisite minimum proficiency level due to a variety of factors, including the difficulty in successfully attaining either level juxtaposed with the limited amount of exposure that they themselves often have to such linguistic input and the restricted opportunities they commonly have to interact with others in communicative situations. To remedy this situation, Chambliss (2012) recommends that teachers strive to increase the amount of target language usage occurring in the classroom by including more opportunities for linguistic input and output to not only support the development of their students' proficiency but also to further enhance their own language competencies in the process. Additionally, the author proposes that the level of a given educator's proficiency in the target language can be indirectly related to their pedagogical effectiveness and their potential impact on student learning.

Moreover, Faez et al. (2021) conducted a meta-analysis in an attempt to determine possible correlations between language teachers' linguistic proficiency and their perceptions of their instructional abilities. Nineteen studies were included in the review which sought to establish clear linkages between educators' sense of their pedagogical skill and their linguistic performance in the target language. Despite the fact that virtually all of these publications included EFL/ESL teachers as research participants, the authors discovered that the majority of the investigations took place internationally (outside of the United States). Results of the analysis of the findings of these studies demonstrated that, although there was indeed a relationship between language proficiency and instructional self-efficacy, this connection was relatively tenuous, leading the authors to conclude that one's view of their own pedagogical effectiveness is likely due to a wide array of factors other than mere linguistic aptitude, including their educational capacity and their individual temperament. More specifically, language proficiency seemed to correlate more with the instructional abilities the teachers possessed than with other classroom activities such as managing the classroom environment and stimulating learner engagement. The authors ultimately contend that, despite the number of published studies in this area, there is a relative dearth of research concerning possible associations between language proficiency and perceived instructional self-efficacy and that more studies should be conducted to further clarify possible linkages between these two constructs.

These two representative publications clearly demonstrate that educators' linguistic proficiency is an essential ingredient in fostering the development of their learners' communicative skills in the target language and that such competence may play a role in their instructional effectiveness in the classroom. A number of studies have also attempted to examine possible relationships between teachers' status as either native or non-native speakers, their proficiency in English, and their sense of their pedagogical abilities (see Calafato (2019) and Selvi et al. (2024) for literature reviews of prominent investigations in this area).

However, few scholars have clearly explained the ways in which they strategically develop pre-service language teachers' understanding of the theory and practice of developing students' language proficiency in their own contexts, and little research has specifically been conducted to examine the contributions of such efforts to prospective language educators' awareness of the importance pf promoting learners' L2 proficiency and their familiarity with instructional strategies and techniques for doing so. The current study is thus at attempt to address these curricular and methodological gaps. The intent of this article is to highlight the logistics and findings of an exploratory study designed to increase ESOL teacher candidates' understanding regarding the theory and practice of developing the proficiency of multilingual learners of English.

The research question that guided this study is as follows: What are pre-service ESOL teachers' perspectives regarding the contribution of a course unit on L2 proficiency to their awareness and understanding of the theory and practice of L2 proficiency?

3. Institutional Context

The purpose of the course unit was to familiarize pre-service ESOL teachers with various theoretical principles governing the development of multilingual learners' proficiency in English with respect to the four language domains and equip them with a variety of instructional strategies and techniques for advancing these students' proficiency in these areas. The unit was integrated into a TESOL methodology course offered during the spring semester of 2024 as part of a teacher education program offered at a four-year postsecondary institution located in the southeastern United States. The overall goal of the course is to familiarize students with a variety of methods and approaches to effectively instruct multilingual learners of English in a range of instructional contexts. Participants included sixteen elementary-education teacher candidates enrolled in the course who agreed to take part in the study. Table 1 below indicates the demographic information of the participants.

Table 1. Demographic Information of Participants

	Category	Number (of students)
Self-Identified Age	20	2
	21	6
	22	3
	23	2
	24	1
	27	1
	31	1
Self-Identified Gender	Female	15
	Male	1
Self-Identified Ethnicity	Asian	1
	Black&White	1
	Caucasian/White	8
	Hispanic/Latinx	6

3.1. Instructional Context

The course unit on L2 proficiency consisted of six modules in total: four two-week modules focused on the exploration of each of the four language domains individually, followed by a final course project and a post-unit questionnaire. The first week of each module included a series of readings intended to acquaint students with important theoretical principles regarding each language domain, while the second week in each module acquainted students with a variety of activities they could conceivably integrate into

their own teaching to advance multilingual learners' proficiency in the respective domain. Table 2 below highlights the four components of the course unit.

Table 2. Language Proficiency Course Unit Modules

	Category	Domain
	1	L2 Listening
	2	L2 Speaking
	3	L2 Reading
Module Description	4	L2 Writing
	5	Proficiency Analysis Project
	6	Post-Questionnaire

The readings that were included in the first week of each module were explored using a multi-step jigsaw activity. Before the implementation of the course unit, students were randomly assigned to one of three groups. During the first week of each module, the pre-service teachers read their assigned chapter before class, assembled into home groups with classmates who had completed the same reading, and discussed their responses to the reading. Next, they were gathered into expert groups with classmates who had each completed a different reading; in these groups, students sharied their understandings with groupmates who had read different chapters so that all could potentially benefit from the information included in each chapter.

Table 3. Chapter Reading by Language Domain/Group

Skill	Group	Reference
L2 Listening	A	Horowitz (2020a)
	B	Vandergrift & Goh (2018)
	C	Ur (2012a)
L2 Speaking	A	Goh (2018)
	B	Gebhard (2017b)
	C	Nunan (2015a)
L2 Reading	A	Horowitz (2020b)
	B	Grabe & Stoller (2018)
	C	Ur (2012b)
L2 Writing	A	Storch (2018)
	B	Gebhard (2017a)
	C	Nunan (2015b)

Finally, teacher candidates individually noted several points of information they gleaned from both reading their individual chapter and discussing the other chapters completed by their fellow students, which they then shared with their classmates. Table 3 below outlines the chapters included in each module by group.

The second week in each module consisted of an exploration of a variety of activities from Gibbons (2014) for each respective language domain that teacher candidates could potentially utilize in their current/future teaching in order to develop their learners' proficiency with respect to a particular language domain. During this section of each module, students were randomly assembled into groups of three to five members with each group identifying several activities from the corresponding chapter that they felt would successfully promote the development of multilingual learners' proficiency in English for that language domain. Gibbons (2014) was specifically chosen for the course unit due to the fact that the text highlights numerous tasks that teachers can easily implement into their instruction to intentionally and strategically advance students' L2 proficiency in each language domain.

Additionally, towards the end of the course, the student teachers completed a proficiency analysis project in which they collected and analyzed one or more speech samples and one or more writing samples of a multilingual learner of English and analyzed the strengths and weaknesses of the student's listening, speaking, and writing proficiencies in English and suggested sample activities that would potentially boost their proficiency in each language domain.

4. Research Context

In order to document and understand participants' views concerning the relevancy of the course unit activities to their developing understanding of the theory and practice of L2 proficiency, the study employed quantitative methods for collecting and analyzing the data. At the conclusion of the four modules that constituted the course unit, participants completed a post-questionnaire consisting of thirty Likert-scale statements created and designed by the author concerning the logistics of the unit . The statements were intended to gather information on the pre-service teachers' attitudes with respect to the specific logistics of the course unit, including the selection of the chapters for each module, the jigsaw activity, the exploration of the language activities from the Gibbons (2014) text, and the pertinence of these module activities to the completion of the proficiency analysis project. After generating the thirty statements, the ranking system was

then established for the questionnaire based on a six-point scale. Although Likert-scale items typically utilize a five-point system, the author instead followed the recommendations of Nemoto and Beglar (2013) who contend that "when possible…6-point [Likert] scales should be used as they permit the possibility of increased measurement precision" (p. 5). Consequently, a six-point scale was included in the questionnaire for the purpose of giving participants a wider range of possible responses to a given statement while also urging them to take a particular stance regarding each statement so that a neutral position could not be adopted as with a five-point scale. It is additionally important to note that, since the language domain of reading was not specifically included in the proficiency analysis project, there are no questions that address the language domain of reading with respect to the project in the questionnaire.

Participants' responses to the statements included in the post-questionnaire were analyzed using descriptive statistics. According to Dörnyei (2007), the objective of descriptive statistics is to summarize findings and describe general tendencies occurring in the data in order to provide a overall snapshot of the behavior of the participant. Similarly, Fisher and Marshall (2009) contend that descriptive statistics involve "numerical and graphical techniques used to organise, present and analyse data" (p. 95). Two types of descriptive statistical procedures were used to analyze participants' responses to the post-questionnaire. First, the mean score for each statement was calculated by determining the sum of the total number of responses and dividing this number by the number of participants. Second, a corresponding percentage for each statement was tabulated by dividing the mean score for each statement by the highest possible response (in this case, six). It is important to note that descriptive statistics were utilized in the analysis of teacher candidates' responses in order to identify overall tendencies occurring in the data without necessarily determining the statistical significance of these responses.

5. Results

Several interesting trends emerged from the analysis of participants' responses to the post-unit questionnaire. First, the statements that were commonly rated the highest in each language domain concerned the proficiency analysis project and the extent to which the project supported participants' understanding of ways to both determine the level of students' proficiency in that domain and promote the development of learners' proficiency in the corresponding domain, with their responses consistently above a mean score of 4.2 and a percentage of agreement over 70% (see Table 4 below).

Table 4. Post-Course Unit Questionnaire Descriptive Statistics (Proficiency Analysis Project)

Skill	Rating	Statement
L2 Listening	4.38 (73.0%)	07. The proficiency analysis project helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' listening proficiency skills in English.
	4.31 (71.8%)	08. The proficiency analysis project helped me understand how to develop English learners' listening proficiency skills in English.
L2 Speaking	4.31 (71.8%)	15. The proficiency analysis project helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' speaking proficiency skills in English.
	4.31 (71.8%)	16. The proficiency analysis project helped me understand how to develop English learners' speaking proficiency skills in English.
L2 Reading	4.31 (71.8%)	21. The class activities on second language reading helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' reading proficiency skills in English.
	4.34 (72.3%)	22. The class activities on second language reading helped me understand how to develop English learners' reading proficiency skills in English.
L2 Writing	4.31 (71.8%)	29. The proficiency analysis project helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' writing proficiency skills in English.
	4.25 (70.8%)	30. The proficiency analysis project helped me understand how to develop English learners' writing proficiency skills in English.

Second, the statements that were rated among the lowest in each domain concerned the jigsaw reading activity, with responses to these statements regularly being assigned a mean score of 2.7 to 3.3 and an average percentage of agreement between 45% and 56% (see Table 5 below).

Table 5. Post-Course Unit Questionnaire Descriptive Statistics (Jigsaw Reading Activity)

Skill	Rating	Statement
L2 Listening	3.19 (53.2%)	03. The jigsaw reading activity helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' listening proficiency skills in English.
	3.38 (56.3%)	04. The jigsaw reading activity helped me understand how to develop English learners' listening proficiency skills in English.'
L2 Speaking	2.75 (45.8%)	11. The jigsaw reading activity helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' speaking proficiency skills in English.
	2.88 (48.0%)	12. The jigsaw reading activity helped me understand how to develop English learners' speaking proficiency skills in English.
L2 Reading	3.06 (51.0%)	19. The jigsaw reading activity helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' reading proficiency skills in English.
	3.00 (50.0%)	20. The jigsaw reading activity helped me understand how to develop English learners' reading proficiency skills in English.
L2 Writing	2.75 (45.8%)	25. The jigsaw reading activity helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' writing proficiency skills in English.
	2.88 (48.0%)	26. The jigsaw reading activity helped me understand how to develop English learners' writing proficiency skills in English.

Third, while the statements related to the jigsaw activity were rated among the lowest across all four language domains, the statements in connection to the readings themselves were consistently rated higher than those pertaining to the jigsaw activity, with responses to these statements given a mean score of 3.5 to to 3.8 and an average percentage of between 59% and 63% (see Table 6 below).

Table 6. Post-Course Unit Questionnaire Descriptive Statistics (Chapter Readings)

Skill	Rating	Statement
L2 Listening	3.81 (63.5%)	01. The chapter I read on second language listening helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' listening proficiency skills.
	3.81 (63.5%)	02. The chapter I read on second language listening helped me understand how to develop English learners' listening proficiency skills.
L2 Speaking	3.81 (63.5%)	09. The chapter I read on second language speaking helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' speaking proficiency skills.
	3.63 (60.5%)	10. The chapter I read on second language speaking helped me understand how to develop English learners' speaking proficiency skills.
L2 Reading	3.63 (60.5%)	17. The chapter I read on second language reading helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' reading proficiency skills.
	3.69 (61.5%)	18. The chapter I read on second language reading helped me understand how to develop English learners' reading proficiency skills.
L2 Writing	3.69 (61.5%)	23. The chapter I read on second language writing helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' writing proficiency skills.
	3.56 (59.3%)	24. The chapter I read on second language writing helped me understand how to develop English learners' writing proficiency skills.

Additionally, the statements concerning the discussions of the proficiency activities from Gibbons (2014) were also rated relatively highly, with responses to these statements assigned a mean score of 4.3 and an average percentage of between 69% and 73% (see Table 7 below).

6. Discussion

The research study explored in this article identified four major outcomes concerning pre-service ESOL teachers' views with respect to the strengths and weaknesses of the course unit on L2 proficiency. First, their responses on the questionnaire indicated that the proficiency analysis project offered them an opportunity to critically examine the linguistic output of a multilingual learner while also becoming familiar with a variety of instruments they could utilize to support them in doing so. This finding tends to suggest that, from the teacher candidates' perspective, the project was largely successful in familiarizing them with a variety of tools to assess and evaluate multilingual learners' proficiency in English and provided them with an opportunity to identify possible strategies and techniques for expanding these students' proficiency in each language domain.

Table 7. Post-Course Unit Questionnaire Descriptive Statistics (Proficiency Activities)

Skill	Rating	Statement
L2 Listening	4.31 (71.8%)	05. The class activities on second language listening helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' listening proficiency skills in English.
	4.31 (71.8%)	06. The class activities on second language listening helped me understand how to develop English learners' listening proficiency skills in English.
L2 Speaking	4.19 (69.8%)	13. The class activities on second language speaking helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' speaking proficiency skills in English.
	4.31 (71.8%)	14. The class activities on second language speaking helped me understand how to develop English learners' speaking proficiency skills in English.
L2 Reading	4.31 (71.8%)	21. The class activities on second language reading helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' reading proficiency skills in English.
	4.34 (72.3%)	22. The class activities on second language reading helped me understand how to develop English learners' reading proficiency skills in English.
L2 Writing	4.38 (73.0%)	27. The class activities on second language writing helped me understand the importance of developing English learners' writing proficiency skills in English.
	4.38 (73.0%)	28. The class activities on second language writing helped me understand how to develop English learners' writing proficiency skills in English.

This may have been the case due to a variety of reasons, including (but not limited to) the fact that a variety of tools were explored in class to help teacher candidates determine the level of multilingual learners' oral and written proficiency in English, including the Student Oral Language Observation Matrix (SOLOM), the Student Written Language Observation Matrix (SWLOM), and the performance definition rubrics for each domain established by the World-Class Instructional Design and Assessment (WIDA) consortium. These resources may have equipped students with concrete strategies and techniques they could potentially utilize in their current/future instruction to determine the current proficiency level of a given learner in the four language domains and identify possible avenues for promoting the development of their proficiency in each domain. This result also indicates that teacher candidates should be provided with multiple opportunities to assess and evaluate multilingual learners' language proficiency via the use of a variety of tools and resources. Consequently, the author plans to include the project in future iterations of the course unit but also intends to more intentionally connect the logistics of the assignment to the specific content explored in the unit. Teacher candidates must also have opportunities to assess and evaluate their students' language production for the purposes of determining their current proficiency in the target language but also selecting particular activities to enhance their communicative abilities in the language.

Second, participants revealed that the jigsaw reading activity was less effective in supporting their exploration of the content of and their responses to the chapters. This result indicates that the jigsaw reading activity, from the participants' standpoint, was not as effective in advancing their understanding of the importance of promoting multilingual learners' proficiency in English or familiarizing them with specific activities and techniques for furthering the development of these students' proficiency. Among other possible factors, this may perhaps have been due to the complexity of the readings, the absence of previous knowledge on teacher candidates' part regarding important theoretical constructs and principles concerning L2 proficiency, and/or the lack of understanding on participants' behalf with respect to the arguments and contentions of the chapter author(s). This outcome thus intimates that the jigsaw activity itself, rather than the readings that comprised the activity, was less effective. It may be that teacher candidates needed more direction and support when participating in the activity, or perhaps the activity was not a productive way for them to explore their emerging understandings of the content of the readings; further information needs to be collected and analyzed to determine what specifically about the jigsaw activity led to these lower ratings and how the activity could be improved in the future. This finding also suggests that caution should be exercised to ensure that students are equipped with the strategies and techniques necessary to conduct effective group discussions so that the structure and organization of such conversations are not left merely to chance. Furthermore, teachers must be intentional and strategic about creating and designing learning environments that guide students in effectively discussing course readings in ways that deepen their understanding and help them critically visualize the readings from different perspectives. Moving forward, the author plans to identify a variety of measures to more intentionally scaffold participants' emerging awareness and understanding of these concepts.

Third, the prospective teachers remarked that the chapters were relatively beneficial in sustaining their evolving understanding of the major theoretical principles underlying L2 proficiency with respect to the four language domains. While this result is encouraging in the sense that participants believed that the readings supported the development of their expertise in the importance of developing students' communicative abilities in the target language and provided them with foundational knowledge in this area, this finding also suggests that care should be taken to select reading selections for pre-service teachers that are appropriate and suitable for this audience but also germane and relevant to their instructional contexts. Consequently, the author plans to continue to include these chapters in future iterations of the course unit

while also discovering and identifying other potential readings on L2 proficiency that may be more accessible and reader-friendly.

Finally, participants indicated that an examination of the proficiency activities contained in Gibbons (2014) further promoted their understanding of the nature of L2 proficiency and provided them with specific tasks they could easily implement in their teaching to further hone their students' linguistic production in English. This finding implies that the activities were relatively effective in providing teacher candidates with an array of specific tasks they could potentially integrate into their current/future instruction to strategically advance their students' proficiency in the four language domains. This result also suggests that it is critical for pre-service teachers to not only become familiar with the underlying principles concerning proficiency but also for them to be knowledgeable regarding specific activities for purposefully advancing students' language proficiency. Moving forward, the author plans to identify similar resources for the purpose of expanding participants' familiarity with other potential activities to advance multilingual learners' proficiency in English.

7. Pedagogical Implications

The overall findings of the study imply several important recommendations for ESOL teacher preparation programs intending to familiarize students with the theory and practice of L2 proficiency. First, educators should carefully and purposefully select readings that distill the fundamental essence of principles governing the construct of proficiency more generally and the nature of listening, reading, speaking, and writing more specifically in a cogent and succinct manner while also striving to avoid complicated and unnecessary academic jargon. Second, educators should not only acquaint pre-service teachers with a broad range of activities for promoting the development of learners' proficiency in the four language domains but should also provide them with multiple opportunities to implement such tasks with students in their field experiences in order to determine optimal ways for advancing their communicative proficiency in the target language. Third, educators should verify that teacher candidates have occasion to utilize a variety of tools and resources for collecting information about learners' current proficiency levels and documenting language growth in these areas. Finally, educators should make certain that the elements of course units or courses on proficiency align with and reinforce each other to form a coherent and holistic framework in which the knowledge and expertise students gain in one module is relevant and applicable to another. In

other words, teacher preparation programs should be intentional and strategic about the ways in which they educate pre-service teachers about ways to promote multilingual learners' linguistic and communicative growth. Ultimately, it is hoped that the present article may stimulate teacher educators across a wide spectrum of institutional contexts to reflect on the current status of the training of pre-service teachers with respect to L2 proficiency and consider other avenues for expanding and deepening candidates' appreciation for and understanding of the importance of developing multilingual learners' L2 proficiency.

8. Conclusion

This article reviewed the logistics and preliminary findings of an exploratory study designed to document pre-service ESOL teachers' views concerning the strengths and weaknesses of a course unit on L2 proficiency. The article began with an exploration of the concept of proficiency and subsequently moved to a discussion of the instructional and research contexts for the investigation. Next, the article provided an overview of the preliminary findings of the study and suggested various possible explanations for these results. More specifically, analysis of participants' responses to the questionnaire indicated that the proficiency analysis project assisted them in understanding the nature of L2 proficiency in a concrete and tangible way through an examination of students' language production, that the jigsaw reading activity was less effective in supporting teacher candidates' exploration and discussion of the chapters, that the readings were moderately successful in developing their knowledge of the underlying principles concerning L2 proficiency, and that the exploration of the proficiency activities in Gibbons (2014) provided them with examples of concrete and tangible ways to develop their students' proficiency in English. Ultimately, it is hoped that the present article may stimulate teacher educators across a wide spectrum of institutional contexts to reflect on the current status of the training of pre-service teachers with respect to L2 proficiency and consider other avenues for expanding and deepening candidates' appreciation for and understanding of the importance of developing multilingual learners' L2 proficiency.

9. Limitations and Future Research

Despite the relevancy of the study's findings, however, the current investigation does possess several limitations. First, the participant sample size is relatively small and contextually dependent, so readers should exercise caution when attempting to extrapolate the findings to their own instructional settings. Second, the course unit was somewhat limited in terms of length and scope, and so the results demonstrate

teacher candidates' current perspective regarding language proficiency but not the potential impact of the course unit on teacher candidates' long-term views with respect to this concept or the application of this information to their own teaching. Third, the data collected during the study solely involved participants' self-reports regarding the contribution of the course unit to their evolving understanding of the theory and practice of L2 proficiency, and so the findings portray an important yet incomplete picture of the role of the course unit in supporting teacher candidates' expertise in and familiarity with L2 proficiency.

Furthermore, although it contributes to the academic literature with respect to enhancing pre-service teachers' openness to and comprehension of strategies and techniques to advance the development of multilingual learners' proficiency in English, the study also points to future investigative directions in this area. First, a number of scholars have explored the importance of advancing pre- and in-service teachers' own proficiency in the target language and/or examined possible relationships between educators' proficiency and their perceived instructional effectiveness, but other factors regarding proficiency should also be investigated, particularly with respect to the identification of best practices when promoting this population's awareness and understanding of the theory and practice of expanding students' communicative performance in the language. Few academics explicitly describe the resources, activities, and/or assignments they include in their respective courses regarding proficiency, and so this information should be more widely documented and disseminated. Second, instead of making judgments about the importance of certain aspects of L2 proficiency by relying solely on participants' self-reports, future studies should include multiple data points and more sophisticated analyses to provide scholars with a more comprehensive view of best practices for promoting student teachers' knowledge in this area. Third, researchers must look at educators' views on proficiency more longitudinally by documenting and analyzing the evolution of teachers' perspectives in this area along with an identification of those factors which may influence their outlook. Finally, scholars should also investigate the level of coherence between teachers' stances on proficiency and their level of fidelity in implementing activities that effectively develop students' proficiency in the language.

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