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## ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING CHALLENGES: CURRENT AND RETROSPECTIVE PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHERS

**Abstract.** While teaching challenges have been shown to affect teacher performance in multiple ways, little is known about the transformations occurring in language teachers' perceptions of challenges over time. Hence, this study purported to analyze EFL teachers' current and retrospective perceptions of challenges associated with language teaching tasks. Quantitative data were collected utilizing a questionnaire and processed through Friedman's ANOVA and a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. A within-subjects comparison revealed a statistically significant difference between current and retrospective perceptions of challenges with a large effect size on all language teaching tasks included in the questionnaire, indicating that experience was a causing variable contributing to transformations in teachers' perceptions of task difficulty. The principal shifts in the participants' views were documented on such tasks as student engagement with language material, effective instruction for all learners, personalizing teaching, and planning and managing instruction. The teaching experience played a less decisive role in the case of teaching speaking, student motivation, teaching vocabulary, teaching reading, student assessment, and knowing students. Notably, the areas persisting as very challenging regardless of experience were teaching speaking, motivating learners, teaching writing, and listening. The study's findings hold implications for initial teacher preparation and development, highlighting areas calling for more attention. The paper presents the results of a rather small-scale investigation tackling only a few of the multiple areas of language teaching which potentially challenge language teachers. Likewise, due to a small research sample ( $n=208$ ) and its limitation to the context of Ukraine, this study does not claim the generalizability of its findings. Nevertheless, the findings reveal in highlighting the tasks posing a substantial challenge to EFL teachers both at the outset of their career and following years spent in it.

**Key words:** challenges, English as a foreign language, teaching experience, current and retrospective perceptions.

**Introduction.** It has been commonly observed that the quality of education is commensurate with the quality of teachers' work. Being held accountable for providing quality instruction and sustaining high standards in education has accelerated the level of challenge experienced by teachers. Unsurprisingly, considerable effort has been expended into the study of teaching challenges in general education. A sizeable body of research has addressed challenges faced by English as a foreign language (EFL) teachers [1; 2; 3]. Meanwhile, certain aspects of the delineated problem are still awaiting a more systematic response. Among them are the perceived challenges EFL teachers experience at the outset of their careers, and following a period spent in the profession. This study is, thus, guided by the following research question: what are the current and retrospective perceptions of challenges held by EFL teachers?

Challenges were studied in the literature through theoretical prisms of cognition and affect, intersecting beliefs, emotions, attitudes, etc. They refer to subjective perceptions of the task difficulty associated with language teaching. Perceptions of challenges affect teacher performance in multiple ways, as summarized in Figure 1. Based on an extant literature review, it was shown that challenges influenced the use of L2 by language teachers in the lessons [4]. Language proficiency was a decisive factor in determining the amount of time language teachers spent speaking L2 [5]. It also determined the general focus of the lesson, where more proficient teachers emphasized authentic communication in English while their less fluent colleagues preferred more grammar-focused instruction [6]. In their study, Back and Dean found that an insufficient level of language proficiency posed a serious challenge, diverting potential candidates from choosing a teaching career [7]. Challenges stemming from insufficient command of EFL were also associated with the level of stress experienced

by language teachers, causing feelings of insecurity and frustration [8, p. 228; 9]. Challenges caused by classroom management issues and student misbehavior also feature among potential sources of stress [10]. Especially vulnerable to the challenge of establishing rapport with learners are novice EFL teachers [2]. In an interview study by Levrints/Lőrincz the participants often referred to challenges associated with learner rapport and discipline as one of the principal sources of stress, leading to teachers' contemplating quitting the profession [3]. Perception of challenges was associated with a threat to EFL teachers' wellbeing, drops in teaching motivation, and teacher attrition in the study by Sulis et al. [11]. Difficulties experienced by language teachers also lead to identity transformations [12; 13]. In his study, H.Xu describes major shifts in teachers' identities as they tackle job-related challenges. Under contextual and job constraints, language teachers abandon their imagined professional identities and assume an identity shaped by attempts to align with the work environment [13]. Perceptions of challenges often impact language teachers' communication styles. Student misbehavior, low confidence in their capability to answer complicated questions, and fear of language errors led teachers to adopt a more authoritarian style [10; 14]. Challenges experienced by novice teachers also led them to adopt a traditional language teaching approach, like grammar-translation, instead of the communicative approach endorsed by the language education program they attended [15]. In addition to the debilitating effect, the literature also mentions the facilitating effect challenges may have on teachers. Whereas tasks perceived as overly complicated diverted from learning at work, tasks viewed as doable led to professional growth [16]. Likewise, the tension between teachers' aspirational identity and their current level of competence enhances professional development [17].



Fig.1. Influence of language teachers' perceptions of challenges on their performance (based on Lőrincz [4])

Although language teaching challenges have been addressed in the literature from different angles, how their perception transforms, beginning with the induction phase and beyond, has been overlooked. Even though several comparative studies of language teachers' challenges with varying lengths of experience were conducted [18; 19], a comparative analysis of within-subjects perceptions of challenges held by EFL teachers currently and in retrospect (i.e. experienced at the outset of teaching) could not be located. The paper thus purports to investigate current and retrospective perceptions of challenges held by EFL teachers and whether their rates alter following a period of exposure to professional activity.

**Research Methodology**

*Participants*

The participants come from Ukrainian educational institutions where English is taught as a foreign language. In all, 208 language teachers consented to take part in the study. They were recruited utilizing a random sampling technique. The teachers occupied posts at different educational levels, from primary to tertiary. Their qualifications ranged from BA to DSC degrees. The latter roughly corresponds to a habilitated doctor in Ukraine. Their language teaching experience varied from 1 to more than 25 years.

*Data collection and analysis*

This study forms a part of a broader examination of EFL teaching challenges in the context of Ukraine. It is quantitative in nature, adopting a survey research design. The instrument of the study was a questionnaire initially used by Lőrincz & Greba, with minor adaptations made to meet the aims of this paper. In particular, the respondents were asked to indicate to what extent they found the enumerated language teaching tasks challenging when they started teaching [18]. Next, they had to indicate how challenging these tasks were at the given moment. The responses were elicited on a five-point Likert scale where 1 stood for not challenging and 5 – most challenging.

The data were processed through Friedman's ANOVA (a nonparametric test in SPSS) and a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test which were used to test whether the rate of perceived challenge associated with EFL teaching decreased as teachers gained experience. Accordingly, the hypothesis was formulated as follows:

Null hypothesis: The mean ranks will be equal in the language teachers' current and retrospective perceptions of challenges.

Alternative hypothesis: The mean ranks will not be equal in the language teachers' current and retrospective perceptions of challenges.

**Results**

As can be seen in Table 1, the mean ranks for perceived challenges decreased as a result of teaching experience, which was evident in the case

of all enumerated tasks displayed in the table's first column. Moreover, the difference between current and retrospective perceptions of challenges was statistically significant in all 15 cases ( $p < .001$ ).

As indicated by the outputted data in Table 1, the null hypothesis of equal mean ranks is rejected. The Friedman's ANOVA analysis for teaching grammar yielded  $\chi^2(1) = 49.846$ , ( $p < .001$ ), 24,4% of the variance in the ranks is attributable to the research condition; teaching vocabulary results:  $\chi^2(1) = 34.945$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 16,8% of the variance caused by experience; teaching pronunciation results:  $\chi^2(1) = 42.706$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 20,5% of the variance caused by experience; teaching speaking results:  $\chi^2(1) = 28.69$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 13,8% of the variance caused by experience; teaching reading:  $\chi^2(1) = 32.143$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 15,5% of the variance caused by experience; teaching writing:  $\chi^2(1) = 44.885$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 21,6% of the variance caused by experience; teaching listening:  $\chi^2(1) = 49,782$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 23,9% of the variance caused by experience; planning and managing instruction:  $\chi^2(1) = 46.407$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 22,3% of the variance caused by experience; assessing student's knowledge:  $\chi^2(1) = 34.133$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 16,4% of the variance caused by experience; engaging all learners with the instructional material:  $\chi^2(1) = 75.111$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 36,1% of the variance caused by experience; motivating learners:  $\chi^2(1) = 48.286$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 23,2% of the variance caused by experience; knowing students:  $\chi^2(1) = 36.125$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 17,4% of the variance caused by experience; providing effective instruction for all learners:  $\chi^2(1) = 58.696$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 28,2% of the variance caused by experience; maintaining discipline:  $\chi^2(1) = 42.667$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 20,5% of the variance caused by experience; differentiating instruction:  $\chi^2(1) = 57.042$ , ( $p < .001$ ), with 27,4% of the variance caused by experience.

Partial eta squared had a large effect in all cases indicating that experience was a decisive factor influencing teachers' perceptions of language teaching challenges. Partial eta squared was the highest in the case of engaging all learners with language material ( $\eta^2 = .361$ ), providing effective instruction for all learners ( $\eta^2 = .282$ ), differentiating instruction ( $\eta^2 = .274$ ), teaching grammar ( $\eta^2 = .244$ ), teaching listening ( $\eta^2 = .239$ ), motivating learners ( $\eta^2 = .232$ ), planning for instruction ( $\eta^2 = .223$ ), teaching writing ( $\eta^2 = .216$ ), maintaining discipline ( $\eta^2 = .205$ ). Thus, the enumerated aspects of language teaching accounted for the research condition (i.e., experience) to a greater extent and were more subject to the influence of teaching experience with a tendency to decrease over time. A decrease in the perceived challenge rates on other aspects of language teaching was accounted for by the research condition to a lesser degree. Consequently, teaching speaking

Table 1.

**EFL teachers' current and retrospective perceptions of challenges:  
within-subjects comparison**

Challenges		Rank order	M	SD	Mean Rank	Kendall's W	Chi-Square	Sig.	Z
1. Teaching grammar	current	11	2.43	1.17	1.33	.244	49.846	.000	-6.905
	retrospective	13	2.9	1.27	1.67				
2. Teaching vocabulary	current	15	2.15	1.18	1.35	.168	34.945	.000	-5.425
	retrospective	15	2.54	1.22	1.65				
3. Teaching pronunciation	current	9	2.48	1.27	1.34	.205	42,706	.000	-6.56
	retrospective	11	2.96	1.16	1.7				
4. Teaching speaking	current	1	3.27	1.3	1.35	.138	28.69	.000	-5.134
	retrospective	1	3.76	1.2	1.65				
5. Teaching reading	current	14	2.38	1.7	1.36	.155	32.143	.000	-5.368
	retrospective	14	2.77	1.5	1.64				
6. Teaching writing	current	3	2.87	1.26	1.32	.216	44.885	.000	-6.895
	retrospective	4	3.38	1.15	1.68				
7. Teaching listening	current	4	2.78	1.2	1.32	.239	49.782	.000	-7.358
	retrospective	5	3.33	1.05	1.7				
8. Planning and managing instruction	current	13	2.38	1.17	1.32	.223	46.407	.000	-6.885
	retrospective	9	3	1.13	1.68				
9. Assessing students' knowledge	current	10	2.44	1.2	1.35	.164	34.133	.000	-6.954
	retrospective	8	3.02	1.25	1.65				
10. Engaging all learners with the instructional material	current	5	2.64	1.2	1.25	.361	75.111	.000	-8.311
	retrospective	2	3.45	1.2	1.75				
11. Motivating learners	current	2	2.89	1.25	1.31	.232	48.286	.000	-6.119
	retrospective	3	3.4	1.35	1.69				
12. Knowing students	current	8	2.48	1.35	1.34	.174	36.125	.000	-5.461
	retrospective	10	2.97	1.28	1.66				
13. Providing effective instruction for all learners	current	7	2.58	1.3	1.28	.282	58.696	.000	-6.746
	retrospective	7	3.19	1.15	1.72				
14. Maintaining discipline	current	12	2.38	1.28	1.35	.205	42.667	.000	-6.767
	retrospective	12	2.92	1.27	1.65				
15. Providing differentiated instruction	current	6	2.6	1.24	1.28	.274	57.042	.000	-7.6
	retrospective	6	3.3	1.07	1.72				

( $\eta^2 = .138$ ), teaching reading ( $\eta^2 = .155$ ), student assessment ( $\eta^2 = .164$ ), teaching vocabulary ( $\eta^2 = .168$ ) and knowing students ( $\eta^2 = .174$ ) were also susceptible to the influence of conditions external to this study.

As shown in the last column of Table 1, post hoc tests using a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test also produced similar to the above-displayed results, showing that experience reduced the level of challenge perceived by the given sample of EFL teachers. Thus, the participants reported feeling less challenged as they gained experience on all 15 variables, with a strong evidence obtained for engaging all learners with the instructional material ( $z = -8.311$ ), differentiating instruction ( $z = -7.6$ ), teaching listening ( $z = -7.358$ ), teaching grammar ( $z = -6.905$ ), teaching writing ( $z = -6.895$ ), assessment ( $z = -6.954$ ) and planning for instruction ( $z = -6.885$ ). In other words, as teachers matured professionally, the challenges associated with these language teaching tasks decreased significantly, suggesting that teachers approach the above tasks with more confidence in their coping capabilities.

In addition, it was of interest what aspects of language instruction EFL teachers found most challenging as they embarked on the teaching career and to compare these findings with currently held views. As displayed in Table 1, in retrospect, teachers were most challenged by teaching speaking ( $M = 3.76$ ), engaging all learners

( $M = 3.45$ ), learner motivation ( $M = 3.40$ ), teaching writing ( $M = 3.38$ ), teaching listening ( $M = 3.33$ ), differentiating instruction ( $M = 3.30$ ), providing effective instruction for all learners ( $M = 3.19$ ), learner assessment ( $M = 3.02$ ), planning and managing instruction ( $M = 3.00$ ). However, a comparative analysis of means on retrospective and current views shows minor discrepancies. Although teaching speaking persisted as the most challenging task, learner motivation shifted to the third place in the list, and so did the responses about engaging all learners with the instructional material (from 2nd to 5th place). Meanwhile, teaching writing and listening have shifted to the 3rd and 4th places in the ranks of challenges. The respondents also reported differences in the challenge rates related to engaging all learners and planning for instruction, which were initially considered more complicated than at the given moment. It can be inferred that many language teaching aspects continue to be perceived as challenging despite a period of exposure to professional activity.

**Discussion.** This study addressed current and retrospective perceptions of challenges by EFL teachers. The quantitative data were collected by means of a questionnaire and processed through Friedman's ANOVA of SPSS. The results of the present study indicate that experience is a causal factor accounting for the decrease

in the perceived rate of challenge associated with tasks of FL teaching. The participants unequivocally reported feeling less challenged by all aspects of language teaching included in the study's instrument following a period spent in the profession. This result was partly corroborated in earlier research, which investigated the impact of experience on language teacher cognitions and teaching effectiveness [20; 21; 22]. In particular, it also showcased the impact of the length of experience on language teachers' professional mindset and perceived competence [18; 23].

However, the present study has additionally documented that the most substantial transformations in the teachers' perceptions occurred in relation to such tasks as student engagement with instructional material, ability to provide effective instruction for all learners, and personalizing teaching. Strong evidence for transformations was also evinced for teaching grammar, listening, and instructional planning, indicating that the respondents attributed their heightened coping capabilities to the experience gained due to engagement with these tasks. Conversely, teaching experience was reported to play a less significant role in the case of teaching speaking, teaching vocabulary, teaching reading, learner assessment, motivation, and knowing students. It could indicate that the participants attributed the rate of challenge on these tasks to other linguistics and psychological aspects of instructed language acquisition.

A comparative within-subjects data analysis revealed that only slight changes occurred in the ranks of perceptions of challenges held by EFL teachers initially and after a period of engagement with language teaching. With minor exceptions, the rank order remained similar on most teaching tasks. Thus, the participants asserted that teaching speaking and learner motivation remained the most challenging tasks despite experience, which accords with previous research. Notably, a large-scale study by Copland et al. involving 4456 language teachers established that teaching speaking and learner motivation were the principal language teaching challenges [24]. Furthermore, teaching writing and listening were considered rather challenging, both initially and after a period spent teaching in the present study. Conversely, the rank order was somewhat different in the case of learner engagement with the instructional material, planning,

and managing instruction, which were considered rather challenging in retrospect and less so with experience.

**Limitations.** The paper presents the results of a rather small-scale investigation tackling only a few of the multiple areas of language teaching which potentially challenge language teachers. Likewise, due to a small research sample (n=208) and its limitation to the context of Ukraine, this study does not claim the generalizability of its findings. Nevertheless, these findings could be revealing in highlighting the tasks posing a substantial challenge to EFL teachers both at the outset of their career and following years spent in it.

**Conclusions.** As shown by the results of the present study, experience is a causal factor contributing to transformations in the perception of challenges by EFL teachers. A comparative within-subjects analysis of current and retrospective perceptions of challenges captured a statistically significant difference in all language teaching tasks included in the study's instrument, yielding a large effect size. It indicates that teachers become more confident in their coping capabilities as they gain experience. Notably, further analysis of the data provides a window into the areas deserving more attention in the periods of initial teacher education, which differ to some extent from those required by more experienced language teachers. Specifically, during the induction period, EFL teachers need more support in such areas as learner engagement with language material, providing effective instruction for all learners, personalizing instruction (providing differentiated and individualized instruction), knowing students, planning and managing instruction, and learner assessment. Interestingly, these areas pose less challenge for language teachers as they mature professionally. By contrast, teaching speaking, learner motivation, teaching writing, and listening featured among very challenging tasks viewed both currently and in retrospect, warranting additional preparation in these areas in the context of initial teacher education and professional development courses. Finally, as suggested by the results, none of the language teaching areas tackled in the questionnaire was considered not challenging by teachers even after years spent in the profession, pivoting the critical role of lifelong learning. The further prospect of this study could include an analysis of relationship between language teachers' challenges and mistakes they commit.

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### **ТРУДНОЩІ ВИКЛАДАННЯ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ: ПОТОЧНІ ТА РЕТРОСПЕКТИВНІ ПЕРЦЕПЦІЇ ВЧИТЕЛІВ**

**Анотація.** З огляду на визначальну роль когнітивних процесів у детермінації професійної діяльності вчителів, наукове зацікавлення становить вивчення трансформацій, яких зазнають ставлення вчителів до труднощів, пов'язаних із викладанням іноземних мов. Відтак метою статті є аналіз поточних і ретроспективних перцепцій вчителями викликів викладання англійської мови як іноземної. У дослідженні застосовано кількісні методи збору й обробки даних, а саме дисперсійний аналіз Фрідмана та тесту Вілкоксона. До дослідження було залучено 208 вчителів англійської мови як іноземної. На основі компаративного аналізу було виявлено статистично значущу різницю між поточними та ретроспективними перцепціями вчителів по всім змінним, які увійшли в інструмент дослідження. Було доведено, що досвід викладання мови є змінною, що сприяє трансформації уявлень вчителів про рівень складності професійних задач. Значні зміни у відповідях респондентів було зафіксовано щодо таких задач, як активне залучення всіх учнів до роботи над навчальним матеріалом, ефективне навчання всіх учнів, індивідуалізація і диференціація навчання, планування й управління навчальним процесом. Додатково встановлено, що вплив досвіду викладання є дещо менш відчутним у випадку з труднощами, пов'язаними з розвитком іншомовної комунікативної компетентності учнів, мотивації учіння, словникового запасу, навичок читання, оцінювання знань учнів та знань про учнів. Згідно з отриманими даними, найскладнішими задачами незалежно від тривалості викладацького досвіду залишаються розвиток іншомовної комунікативної компетентності учнів, навчальної мотивації, навчання письма й аудіювання. У статті представлено результати досить невеликого дослідження, яке стосується лише кількох із багатьох сфер викладання мови, які потенційно викликають проблеми з викладачами мови. Так само, через невелику вибірку дослідження (n=208) та її обмеженість контекстом України, це дослідження не претендує на узагальнення своїх висновків. Тим не менш, ці висновки можуть бути показовими для висвітлення завдань, які становлять суттєвий виклик для вчителів EFL як на початку їхньої кар'єри, так і в наступні роки, проведені в ній.

**Ключові слова:** труднощі, англійська як іноземна мова, вчитель, досвід викладання, поточні та ретроспективні перцепції.