

Setting Threshold Language Proficiency Levels for the Iranian High School EFL Teachers

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Abstract

Evaluating teacher candidates' competencies, demonstrating that they are prepared to teach at high school level is inconceivable without clearly defined and agreed upon standards. Since EFL teachers' language proficiency levels in the target language is a significant factor in teaching effectiveness, this study intended to set threshold listening, speaking, reading and writing proficiency levels for the Iranian high school EFL teachers based on ACTFL proficiency guidelines. To this end, a concurrent mixed-method qualitative quantitative approach was conducted. Data were collected through conducting semi-structured interviews with 40 teacher educators and administering a seven-point Likert scale questionnaire to 212 high school EFL teachers. The results indicated that high school EFL teachers must be able to understand, speak, and write English at a minimum level of Advanced-Low and be able to read English at a minimum level of Advanced-Mid as defined in the ACTFL proficiency scale in order to teach English effectively. The results of this study can be used as benchmarks in prospective high school EFL teachers' initial certification and licensing and in the design of pre-service EFL teacher education program at Farhangian University.

Keywords: ACTFL, High school EFL teachers, Proficiency, Threshold level

1. Introduction

In the field of education, teacher effectiveness has been the focus of researchers' attention for the past twenty years (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Marzano, 2003; Stronge, Ward, & Grant, 2011). Since in foreign language classes, the language is not only the subject studied but also the medium of instruction, it is logical to say that teachers must be able to speak, read, write and understand the language in order to teach it effectively. Research by different scholars showed that teachers' language proficiency level in the target language is a significant factor in teaching effectiveness (Baily, 2006; Banno, 2003; Ben-Peretz, 2010; Butler, 2004; Elder & Ok Ki, 2014; Farrell & Richards, 2007; Murdoch, 1994; Richard, 2012). Due to the importance of EFL teachers' language proficiency level in teaching effectiveness, "there should be a threshold language proficiency level a teacher needs to have reached in the target language in order to be able to teach it effectively" (Richards, 2012, p. 47). As put forward by Cambridge English Teaching Framework (2015), every language teacher requires a certain level of language proficiency in order to teach language effectively; however, depending on the teaching context and language levels of the group of learners being taught, the level of language proficiency that is required of language teachers is likely to vary. Considering the Iranian high school context, this study intends to set threshold listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency for Iranian high school EFL teachers. In the absence of high school EFL teacher's language proficiency standards, high school EFL teachers have been selected among teachers with language academic degrees, without considering their English language proficiency level which, as Richards (2012) puts it, affects their language teaching significantly.

2. Literature Review

2.1. ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines

The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) Proficiency Guidelines, first published in 1986 and revised in 1999 and 2012 are a popular instrument for the evaluation of language proficiency. Despite their age, these guidelines are still used in foreign language professional circles around the world through their prominence in the standards for foreign language teaching and learning and in the textbooks used in foreign language teacher preparation programs (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003). According to ACTFL (2012):

The ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines are the descriptions of what individuals can do with language in terms of speaking, writing, listening, and reading in real world. For each skill, they identify five major levels of proficiency: Distinguished, Superior, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice. The major levels, Advanced, Intermediate, and Novice, are subdivided into High, Mid, and Low sub-levels. Together, these levels form a hierarchy in which each level subsumes all lower levels (p. 3).

These guidelines are common currency in the discourse of foreign language teachers and pre-service teacher candidates around the world (Liskin-Gasparro, 2003). Thus, this study intends to set threshold listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency levels for the Iranian high school EFL teachers based these guidelines.

2.2. Studies on EFL Teacher Language Proficiency Standards

Language proficiency is the linchpin of nonnative EFL teacher competencies (ACTFL, 2002; Andrews, 2003; Baily, 2006; Banno, 2003; Ben-Peretz, 2010; Butler, 2004; Elder & Ok Ki, 2014; Farrell & Richards, 2007; Kamhi-Stein, 2009; Murdoch, 1994; Richard, 2012; Richards, Conway, Roskvist& Harvey, 2013; Seidlhofer, 1999). For instance, Murdoch (1994) called language proficiency as “the bedrock of non-native EFL teachers’ professional confidence” (p. 254). In the same vein, research by Seidlhofer (1999) shows that language teachers’ confidence is dependent upon his or her own level of language proficiency, so a teacher who perceives herself or himself to be weak in the target language will have low confidence in her or his own teaching ability and Medgyes (2001) believes that the teachers who have not reached a threshold level of proficiency in the target language rely most often on the textbooks and less likely to be able to do improvisational teaching.

In EFL settings, education departments have set threshold language proficiency levels for their non-native EFL teachers to meet in order to be able to teach English effectively. For instance, ACTFL (2002) sets the threshold language proficiency level for teachers of foreign languages such as French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish at Advanced-Low Level on the ACTFL proficiency scale to receive teaching certification and those who teach Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean, are required to perform at the Intermediate -High level to receive the teaching certification. In Albania and Ecuador, education departments set the threshold language proficiency levels based on Common European Framework of References (CEFR) for languages. They set

the threshold language proficiency level for teachers of foreign languages at B2 level in four language skills on the CEFR scale (Kuhlman & Knezevic, 2013). In Uruguay, Uruguayan ministry of education used the TESOL p-12 ESL teacher standards as the primary source for developing Uruguayan EFL teacher standards. Owing to the fact that the teacher standards developed by TESOL do not include language proficiency since it is assumed that all teachers in the US will be native or at least native-like users of English, they adopted the ACTFL proficiency standards developed for foreign language teacher in the United States (Kuhlman, 2010). In China, teacher standards were designed with local applications in mind. They were built around eight domains including language proficiency that reflect best practices while respecting the Chinese educational system (Katz & Snow, 2009). In Egypt, as Katz and Snow (2003, 2009) and Kuhlman and Knezevic (2013) explained, four sets of educational standards were developed for teachers, in-service teacher trainers, educational leaders, and in-service training program within the Egyptian public school EFL context. The standards were built around seven domains including language proficiency domain. These standards describe what teachers and educators should know and be able to do as a result of instruction or training in the knowledge, skills, and attitudes essential for effective EFL education (Katz & Snow, 2003).

In Iran, Farhangian University whose main mission is to train and educate prospective school teachers including high school EFL teachers has taken a new policy to assess the professional competencies of its graduates including ELT graduates by requiring them to go through a performance assessment as part of the licensing requirements. In this regard, evaluating teacher candidates' competencies, showing that the teachers are prepared to enter the teaching profession at high school level may be impossible without clearly defined standards (Kuhlman & Knezevic, 2013). The review of studies on EFL teacher language proficiency level suggests that no research has been carried out to set threshold listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency levels for the Iranian high school EFL teachers. Thus, the present study is an attempt to fill this gap. As a result, the following research questions were addressed:

1. Which level of language proficiency on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines can be considered as the threshold listening proficiency level that Iranian EFL teachers need to have reached in English in order to be able to teach English effectively at high schools?

2. Which level of language proficiency on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines can be considered as the threshold speaking proficiency level that Iranian EFL teachers need to have reached in English in order to be able to teach English effectively at high schools?
3. Which level of language proficiency on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines can be considered as the threshold reading proficiency level that Iranian EFL teachers need to have reached in English in order to be able to teach effectively at high schools?
4. Which level of language proficiency on the ACTFL proficiency guidelines can be considered as the threshold writing proficiency level that Iranian EFL teachers need to have reached in English in order to be able to teach at high schools?

3. Methodology

3.1. Design and Context of Study

The design of the present study was concurrent triangulation mixed method approach (Creswell, 2009) that involved collecting both qualitative and quantitative data concurrently from teacher educators at Farhangian University campuses and high school EFL teachers teaching at different high schools around the country respectively and then comparing the two databases to determine if there was convergence, differences, or some combination between the qualitative and quantitative obtained data.

3.2. Participants

To collect the qualitative data, 40 EFL teacher educators at Farhangian University campuses were purposively selected to participate in the present study. They were PhD holders (N=16), and PhD candidates (N= 24). The selection criteria were their degree, their teaching experience as well as their consent to take part in this study. The average teaching experience of the participants in this part of the study was nine years. The participants of the quantitative part of this study were 212 high school EFL teachers gathered at Shahid Rajaei University in Tehran by Ministry of Education to receive a three-day training on the teaching of the newly published high school English textbook, 'Vision One' in the summer of 2016. They were from different cities in Iran. They came to Tehran to receive training on this book and then go back to their own cities to train their colleagues on how

to teach the above-mentioned book. Convenient sampling technique was used to select 212 out of 310 high school EFL teachers present at this university. The sample consisted of 60 female and 152 male. With regard to their academic degrees, 53 of the participants had BA degree, 106 had MA degree, 41 were PhD candidates, and 12 had PhD degree.

Table 1.

Demographic Background of the Participants

	Total	Degree				Gender		Teaching Experience		
		PhD	PhD Candidate	MA	BA	Female	Male	1 -10 years	10-20 years	20-30 years
EFL Teacher Educators	40	16	24	0	0	12	28	25	15	----
High school EFL Teachers	212	12	41	106	53	60	152	88	95	29

3.3. Instruments

Semi-structured interview and a researcher-made questionnaire were used to collect the data in this study.

3.3.1. Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 40 EFL teacher educators. Four questions were developed to elicit the interviewees' perspectives on the minimum level of language proficiency that Iranian EFL teachers need to have reached in English in order to be able to teach at high schools (see Appendix A). Before the administration, two EFL experts were asked to give their views on the interview questions. Based on their feedback, the wordings of the questions were changed to make them unambiguous. The researchers, first, delivered ACTFL proficiency guidelines published in 2012 to the participants and then they were interviewed to set threshold language proficiency levels that high school EFL teachers need to have reached in listening, speaking, reading and writing in order to be able to teach effectively. Each interview lasted 30 to 40 minutes. As interviews with teachers were semi-structured, there were flexible interactions so that the EFL teachers could elaborate on the subject matter.

3.3.2. Questionnaire

To collect quantitative data, a four- item questionnaire (see Appendix B) with a seven-Likert scale ranging from ‘1=Intermediate-Low level’ to ‘7=distinguished level’ was developed. The reason for choosing a questionnaire, as stated by Aldridge and Levine (2001), was its potential to ensure the collection of a large amount of data in a fast, precise, and rather effective manner. The items covered the components of language proficiency as defined by ACTFL proficiency guidelines published in 2012. The reason for not including the ‘Novice’ and ‘Superior’ levels in this questionnaire is that the former is too low and the latter is too high for high school EFL teachers to be considered as their threshold levels of language proficiency. As the questionnaire was developed for the purpose of this study, it was sent to three EFL experts for content and face validation. Based on the feedback received from the experts, some of the items were revised with regard to wordings. To determine the reliability of the questionnaire, it was piloted to 30 high school EFL teachers who were in every way similar to the target population. The Cronbach’s reliability of the questionnaire was 0.81.

3.4. Data Collection Procedure

Initially, Iranian EFL teacher educators at Farhangian University who were PhD candidates and PhD holders were selected purposively to be the members of the professional community in order to set a threshold language proficiency level for the high school EFL teachers based on ACTFL proficiency guidelines. To this end, the researchers delivered ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines to the professional community. Next, to achieve consensus and make decision about the minimum listening, speaking, reading and writing proficiency levels for the high school EFL teachers, the researchers interviewed all of the members of the professional community. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and then content- analyzed.

To triangulate the data obtained through interviews, a four-item questionnaire with a seven- point Likert scale ranging from 1= Intermediate- Low level to 7= distinguished level was developed. Then, the questionnaire was distributed among 250 high school EFL teachers along with a copy of ACTFL proficiency guidelines. The respondents were asked to read the ACTFL proficiency guidelines and then mark the levels of language proficiency that they thought could be considered as the threshold listening, speaking, reading, and

writing proficiency level for the Iranian high school EFL teachers. Out of the 250 copies of the distributed questionnaire, 220 copies of the questionnaire were completed and returned. Eight of the questionnaires were excluded since they were incomplete. This left the researcher with 212 questionnaires for analysis.

3.5. Data Analysis Procedure

To analyze the interviews, two phases were taken: a vertical analysis and then a horizontal analysis phase (Miles & Huberman, 2014). In vertical phase, each of the participants' interviews was analyzed separately. In the horizontal phase, comparative analysis was used to look for common patterns as well as differences among the interviews. Then, descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages) were used to analyze the collected data.

To analyze the questionnaire, descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentages) were also used to analyze the collected data.

4. Results

In an effort to set threshold listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency levels for high school EFL teachers based on ACTFL proficiency guidelines, interviews were conducted with EFL teacher educators at Farhangian University. In addition, data obtained from a large group of high school EFL teachers through questionnaire were used to further examine the issue.

4.1. Interview Results

Analyzing the participants' responses revealed that more than 77% of the interviewees set the threshold listening proficiency at Advanced-Low level. Regarding speaking, 75% of them set the threshold speaking proficiency at advanced-Low level. More than 72% of them set the threshold reading proficiency at Advanced-Mid level. Regarding writing, 70% of the interviewees set the threshold writing proficiency at Advanced-Low level. On the whole, interviewees set the threshold listening, speaking and writing proficiency level for high school EFL teachers at Advanced-Low and the threshold reading proficiency for these teachers at Advanced-Mid as defined by ACTFL proficiency guidelines. The results of the interviews are presented in Table 2.

Table 2.

Frequency and Percentage of Participants' Responses in the Interviews

Language Proficiency Components	Language Proficiency Levels					
	Intermediate-Low	Intermediate-Mid	Intermediate-High	Advanced-Low	Advanced-Mid	Advanced High
Listening	0 0%	2 5%	3 7.5%	31 77.5%	4 10%	0 0%
Speaking	4 10%	0 0%	4 10%	30 75%	2 5%	0 0%
Reading	0 0%	0 0%	4 10%	5 12.5%	29 72.5%	2 5%
Writing	0 0%	5 12.5%	4 10%	28 70%	3 7.5%	0 %0

4.2 Questionnaire Results

The participants' responses to the questionnaire were analyzed by running descriptive statistics (frequency counts and percentage). Table 2 shows that more than 75% of the respondents set the threshold listening proficiency level at Advanced-Low level (Item 1). With regard to speaking (Item 2), more than 79 % of the respondents set the threshold speaking proficiency level at Advanced-Low level. With regard to reading, more than 73% of them set the threshold reading proficiency level at Advanced-Mid level. In terms of writing, more than 72% of them set the threshold writing proficiency level at Advanced-Mid level. In what follows, the results of the questionnaire data analysis are reported.

Table 3.

Frequency and Percentage of Participants' Responses in the Questionnaire

Language Proficiency Components	Language Proficiency Levels						
	Intermediate-Low	Intermediate-Mid	Intermediate-High	Advanced-Low	Advanced-Mid	Advanced-High	Distinguished level
1 Listening	0 %0	0 %0	37 17.5%	160 75.4%	15 7%	0 0%	0 0%
2 Speaking	0 0%	0 0%	25 11.8%	168 79.2%	19 9%	0 0%	0 0%
3 Reading	0 0%	0 0%	12 5.7%	41 19.3%	155 73.1%	6 1.9%	0 0%
4 Writing	0 0%	0 0%	37 17.5%	153 72.2%	22 10.4%	0 0%	0 0%

By comparing the results of the qualitative and quantitative data analysis, the researchers found that the results converged strongly. As it can be seen in Table 1, analysis of the participants' responses in the interviews showed that high school EFL teachers must be able to understand, speak, and write English at the minimum level of Advanced-Low and be able to read English texts at a minimum level of Advanced-Mid, as defined in the ACTFL proficiency guidelines in order to teach English effectively. Analyzing questionnaire responses in Table 2 also revealed that high school EFL teachers must be able to understand, speak, and write English at the minimum level of Advanced-Low and read and understand English texts at a minimum level of Advanced-Mid as defined in the ACTFL proficiency guidelines in order to teach English effectively.

5. Discussion

As it was mentioned above, every language teacher requires a certain level of language proficiency in order to teach language effectively; however, depending on the teaching context and language levels of the group of learners being taught, the level of language proficiency that is required of language teachers is likely to vary (Cambridge English Teaching Framework, 2015). Considering the Iranian high school context, this study was an attempt to set threshold listening, speaking, reading, and writing proficiency levels for Iranian high school EFL teachers based on ACTFL proficiency guidelines. The results showed that high school EFL teachers must be able to understand, speak, and write English at the minimum level of Advanced-Low and read and understand English texts at a minimum level of Advanced-Mid as defined in the ACTFL proficiency guidelines in order to teach English effectively. These threshold levels specify the minimum proficiency required for Iranian EFL teachers to carry out their professional practice effectively at high schools (see Appendix C).

The findings of the present study regarding listening, speaking, and writing support the findings of the study by Velez-Rendon (2002) that set the threshold language proficiency level for foreign language teachers at Advanced-Low as defined by the ACTFL proficiency guidelines. Similarly, the results support ACTFL (2002) that set the threshold language proficiency level for teachers of foreign languages such as French, German, Hebrew, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, and Spanish at Advanced-Low on the ACTFL proficiency scale. However, regarding reading, the results are not in line with ACTFL

(2002) and Velez-Rendon (2002) who set the minimum reading proficiency for foreign language teachers at Advanced-Low level. This discrepancy can be attributed to the fact that reading skill due to its importance in university entrance examination is emphasized over listening, speaking, and writing skills at Iranian high schools.

6. Conclusion

The findings of the present study can have theoretical and practical implications for high school EFL teacher initial certification and licensing, and EFL pre-service teacher education program at Farhangian University. At the theoretical level, this study is the only piece of research that has set the threshold listening, speaking, reading and writing proficiency levels that are required for every high school EFL teacher. At the practical level, the findings can be used as benchmark standards for the present and prospective EFL teachers to meet in order to be able to teach English at high schools. The findings can also be used in high school EFL teacher initial certification and licensing through which prospective EFL teachers get licensed to teach English at high schools upon completing pre-service teacher education program. For instance, a recent policy at Farhangian University aims at assessing the professional competencies of its ELT graduates by requiring them to go through a performance assessment as part of the licensing requirements. Thus, Farhangian University can use the threshold language proficiency levels obtained in this study as yardstick to assess the language proficiency of its ELT graduates. The results of this study can also be used in the design of pre-service EFL teacher education program at Farhangian University by including adequate materials in the pre-service EFL teacher program to help student teachers studying at this university to reach the expected language proficiency level.

This study has some limitations. First, EFL high school textbooks were not considered in the data collection process as some of the high school new English textbooks were not published at the time of this study. Second, the results of this study are only generalizable to high school EFL teachers in Iran.

Further research can be carried out in order to set the threshold levels of competency for each of the components that constitute the high school EFL teachers' content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Which level of language proficiency on the ACTFL proficiency scale can be considered as the threshold listening proficiency level for the Iranian high school EFL teachers?
2. Which level of language proficiency on the ACTFL proficiency scale can be considered as the threshold speaking proficiency level for the Iranian high school EFL teachers?
3. Which level of language proficiency on the ACTFL proficiency scale can be considered as the threshold reading proficiency level for the Iranian high school EFL teachers?
4. Which level of language proficiency on the ACTFL proficiency scale can be considered as the threshold writing proficiency level for the Iranian high school EFL teachers?

Appendix B: Language Proficiency Questionnaire

Degree: BA in English <input type="checkbox"/> MA in English <input type="checkbox"/> PhD Candidate <input type="checkbox"/> PhD in English <input type="checkbox"/>			Years of teaching experiences:					
<p>Dear Participants: The aim of this questionnaire is to SET THRESHOLD (Minimum) LISTENING, SPEAKING, READING AND WRITING PROFICIENCY LEVELS REQUIRED OF EFL TEACHERS' PRACTICE AT HIGH SCHOOLS BASED ON ACTFL PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES.</p> <p>Please first read American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency guidelines and then check the answer that best describes your view on each item. Thank you in advance.</p> <p>The numbers 1 to 7 stand for:</p>								
Intermediat e-Low	Intermediat e-Mid	Intermediate- High	Advanced- Low	Advance d-Mid	Advance- High	Distinguished		
1	2	3	4	5	6	7		
		Levels of Language Proficiency						
Items		1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	The minimum level of listening proficiency that high school EFL teachers need to have reached in English to able to teach English effectively is.....							
2	The minimum level of speaking proficiency that high school EFL teachers need to have reached in English to able to teach English effectively is.....							
3	The minimum level of reading proficiency that high school EFL teachers need to have reached in English to able to teach English effectively is.....							
4	The minimum level of writing proficiency that high school EFL teachers need to have reached in English to able to teach English effectively is.....							

Appendix C: The Minimum Level of Proficiency Required of High School EFL Teachers Based on ACTFL Proficiency Scale

Advanced-Low (Listening)

At the Advanced Low sublevel, listeners are able to understand short conventional narrative and descriptive texts with a clear underlying structure though their comprehension may be uneven. The listener understands the main facts and some supporting details. Comprehension may often derive primarily from situational and subject-matter knowledge.

Advanced-Low (speaking)

Speakers at the Advanced Low sublevel are able to handle a variety of communicative tasks. They are able to participate in most informal and some formal conversations on topics related to school, home, and leisure activities. They can also speak about some topics related to employment, current events, and matters of public and community interest.

Advanced Low speakers demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe in the major time frames of past, present, and future in paragraph-length discourse with some control of aspect. In these narrations and descriptions, Advanced Low speakers combine and link sentences into connected discourse of paragraph length, although these narrations and descriptions tend to be handled separately rather than interwoven. They can handle appropriately the essential linguistic challenges presented by a complication or an unexpected turn of events.

Responses produced by Advanced Low speakers are typically not longer than a single paragraph. The speaker's dominant language may be evident in the use of false cognates, literal translations, or the oral paragraph structure of that language. At times their discourse may be minimal for the level, marked by an irregular flow, and containing noticeable self-correction. More generally, the performance of Advanced Low speakers tends to be uneven.

Advanced Low speech is typically marked by a certain grammatical roughness (e.g., inconsistent control of verb endings), but the overall performance of the Advanced-level tasks is sustained, albeit minimally. The vocabulary of Advanced Low speakers often lacks

specificity. Nevertheless, Advanced Low speakers are able to use communicative strategies such as rephrasing and circumlocution.

Advanced Low speakers contribute to the conversation with sufficient accuracy, clarity, and precision to convey their intended message without misrepresentation or confusion. Their speech can be understood by native speakers unaccustomed to dealing with non-natives, even though this may require some repetition or restatement. When attempting to perform functions or handle topics associated with the Superior level, the linguistic quality and quantity of their speech will deteriorate significantly.

Advanced-Mid (Reading)

At the Advanced-Mid sublevel, readers are able to understand conventional narrative and descriptive texts, such as expanded descriptions of persons, places, and things and narrations about past, present, and future events. These texts reflect the standard linguistic conventions of the written form of the language in such a way that readers can predict what they are going to read. Readers understand the main ideas, facts, and many supporting details. Comprehension derives not only from situational and subject-matter knowledge but also from knowledge of the language itself. Readers at this level may derive some meaning from texts that are structurally and/or conceptually more complex.

Advanced-Low (writing)

Writers at the Advanced Low sublevel are able to meet basic work and/or academic writing needs. They demonstrate the ability to narrate and describe in major time frames with some control of aspect. They are able to compose simple summaries on familiar topics. Advanced Low writers are able to combine and link sentences into texts of paragraph length and structure. Their writing, while adequate to satisfy the criteria of the Advanced level, may not be substantive. Writers at the Advanced Low sublevel demonstrate the ability to incorporate a limited number of cohesive devices, and may resort to some redundancy and awkward repetition. They rely on patterns of oral discourse and the writing style of their first language. These writers demonstrate minimal control of common structures and vocabulary associated with the Advanced level. Their writing is understood by natives not accustomed to the writing of non-natives, although some

additional effort may be required in the reading of the text. When attempting to perform functions at the Superior level, their writing will deteriorate significantly.