

Language Learning Plateau: EFL Teachers' Perceptions and Practical Recommendations

Dinara Utegulova

K.Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University, Kazakhstan

Kulpash Koptleuova

Baishev University, Kazakhstan

Nurkhanym Bauyrzhan

K.Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University, Kazakhstan

Sandugash Mukhtarova

K.Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University, Kazakhstan

Akhmaral Khairzhanova

Kh. Dosmukhamedov Atyrau University, Kazakhstan

Danagul Assylzhanova

Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages, Kazakhstan

Abstract—This study explores EFL teachers' perceptions of the language learning plateau and identifies the recommendations teachers have for overcoming it. Thematic analysis is used to analyse the data from ten English teachers who teach students from intermediate to advanced levels. The findings show that there is a lack of awareness of the term among EFL teachers, yet the idea of the plateau is familiar. Surprisingly, some teachers are found to be in the plateau themselves. This study also discusses the issues teachers are struggling with, and some useful strategies they use to help students move beyond the plateau.

Index Terms—language acquisition, language learning plateau, perceptions, teaching EFL

Each individual's experience of learning a new language is unique and challenging in its own way. According to Murphy (2017), learning a foreign language is easy for some people, thus they succeed in reaching the advanced level of language proficiency; however, for others it is a struggle to master their foreign language skills and it is interesting why people do not make any improvements despite their efforts. Those who do not see any progress in their learning process may feel anxious and frustrated, which sometimes makes them give up on learning a foreign language (Richards, 2008). Such students might feel like they have got stuck in the same level of language proficiency as they need to start learning it over and over again (Yi, 2007). There are numerous cases when foreign language learners claimed that they lack skills or have no aptitude for learning foreign languages. However, it is very important for learners to understand and for teachers to explain to their students that there is a phenomenon in the language learning which might explain the reasons for such a struggle; this phenomenon is called a language learning plateau.

The plateau phenomenon in the language learning is not studied properly. It should be highlighted, that in almost all the studies about language learning plateau researchers focused on the factors causing the plateau and gave some pedagogical implications that could possibly address it (Mirzae et al., 2017; Richards, 2008). However, no studies were conducted about the techniques and activities that are being used by teachers in practice to overcome it. Most of the times researchers were interested in students' perspectives about the plateau, and almost none of them discussed teachers' perceptions.

Despite the fact that our knowledge about the language learning plateau is limited, researchers who investigated this topic claim that teacher's role is crucial in helping learners to overcome the plateau (Yi, 2007; Richards, 2008). That is why, teachers should, first of all, be aware of the existence of such a phenomenon in the language learning; without this knowledge both students and teachers might have hard times, because not only students, but also teachers struggle a lot when they do not see the outcomes of their work. So, indeed, this is an important period not only for a student, but also for a teacher.

This study may help foreign language teachers who have students in the plateau phase. Findings of the study can be used for further research of this problem. This research, as any other researches in this field, will be a valuable input to the existing literature.

I. BACKGROUND

A. *What Is a Language Learning Plateau?*

The term 'learning plateau' was first used in educational psychology (Collins et al., 1973). This phenomenon implies that a learner does not make any significant improvements although she practices and puts enough efforts for learning new skills. According to Xu (2009), the learning plateau can be demonstrated as a flat part on the learning curve, which comes right after making a quick improvement by the learner in the learning process. This phenomenon is widely encountered in the field of second and foreign language learning.

According to many researchers, such as Richards (2008), Yi (2011), Shormani (2013), Murphy (2017) and others, the language learning plateau might be considered as a temporary state and can be overcome when treated correctly. Murphy (2017) describes the language learning plateau as a point where a learner continues to make progress but does not seem to advance to the next language benchmark; however, he differentiates language learning plateau from fossilisation, which is sometimes called as a 'temporary plateau', saying that the former is 'only a temporary slowing or stopping of learning', whereas the latter is a 'permanent stabilisation'.

Lightbown and Spada (2006) define fossilisation as errors that appear in the speech of students despite progress in other areas of language development. These errors do not affect our understanding of the speaker, thus, in lower levels of proficiency are less irritating (Richards, 2008).

B. *Research Evidence About the Language Learning Plateau and How It Happens*

Some researchers believe that students experience the language learning plateau at a particular level of the language proficiency, namely, when transiting from intermediate to more advanced levels (Richards, 2008; Yi, 2011; Murphy, 2017). That is why, the language learning plateau is sometimes called an 'intermediate plateau'. According to Yi (2011), students tend to be highly motivated to learn and to memorize at the early stages of language acquisition because of the following reasons: all the input in language is new to learners and they assume that they are able to immediately use what is being learnt in communication with native speakers. Richards (2008) suggests that as learners progress and reach the intermediate level, improvement slows down than it used to be in the beginning, making learners' efforts elusive and leading learners to frustration and feeling that they may have reached the plateau. Although intermediate/upper-intermediate learners' characteristics and needs may differ, there are some common problems that they will experience: an overuse of lower-level vocabulary, fluency which progresses at the expense of complexity, inadequate productive skills, fossilised language errors, and limited awareness of collocations usage, which makes students' speech lack native-like characteristics (Richards, 2008).

Much in the same way, Yi (2011) points out insufficient productive skills as one of the problems leading to plateau. He believes that learners need to develop their productive skills instead of constantly improving only their receptive skills, as the productive work may be a key for overcoming the plateau. The reason is that when students try to express their ideas, they feel the demand in higher language proficiency. It makes them realize that being able to understand the foreign language is not enough, and what they lack is the ability to actually use it in conversations. This makes students more persistent in their learning and they try to overcome frustration. It means that more communication-oriented learning should take place in the learning process.

However, there might be some cases when intermediate students can have relatively fluent and accurate speech, but lack complexity (Richards, 2008). In order for learners to make their language complex, they need to acquire new linguistic forms and use them in their speech. Richards (2008) gives the following example: learners have already learned and are comfortably using present and past tenses, now when they learn the perfect tense learners' linguistic systems are to be restructured for incorporating the perfect tense. Normally, this restructuring takes some time, as learners tend to overuse the structures they have already mastered. This situation may have 2 scenarios: 1) learners gradually acquire newly learned linguistic items; 2) restructuring never happens, so new forms do not pass into their linguistic systems, which may lead to the plateau.

In their grounded theory study, Mirzaei et al. (2017) investigated the plateau phenomenon in the EFL setting and found that three main factors contribute to the language learning plateau, such as instruction-related variables, learner-related variables, and going through problems. All these factors cause the plateau in the order they are presented, so 'it (i) starts off with instructional variables, (ii) becomes reinforced by the learners' characteristics, and (iii) finally comes to surface when the learners undergo unpleasant experiences which are the signs of reaching learning plateau' (Mirzaei et al., 2017, p. 204). The instruction-related variables are strongly connected with teachers: types of materials they use, methods of teaching, teaching styles, and their interaction with students. Learner-related variables include such categories as learners' affection, their cognition and meta-cognition, and the learning strategies they use. Finally, the third variable, which is going through problems, means a stage when learners start to understand that they are on plateau and experience anxiety and frustration. It is believed that students who are anxious cannot perform well (Horwitz et al., 1986; Krashen, 1981). At this stage they become very sensitive and lose their confidence, in other words the affective factors become more obvious. That is why, learners should review their own personalities which may hinder them from moving beyond the plateau and further progress in their learning.

C. *Extensive Reading as One of the Ways to Overcome the Plateau*

Solution to some of the problems which students experience in the language learning plateau may be found in the researches related to an extensive reading, where its positive effect on language learning and, particularly, on vocabulary growth was proven (Suk, 2017; Lao & Krashen, 2000; Aliponga, 2013; Webb & Chang, 2015; Krashen, 2004; Nation, 2001).

The extensive reading is defined by Hafiz and Tudor (1990) as “the reading of large amount of materials in the L2 for personal pleasure and interest, and without the addition of productive tasks or follow-up language work” (p. 4). Renandya (2007) explains the theory behind extensive reading by quoting Christine Nuttal (1992, p. 168): ‘The best way to improve one’s knowledge of a foreign language is to go and live among its speakers. The next best way is to read extensively in it.’ He believes that language is learnt when there is continuous input and this input is comprehensible. However, in EFL setting it is quite difficult to create such an immersive input-rich classroom environment. Thus, he believes that providing students with large supply of books that suit their interests and levels, preparing enjoyable after-reading activities and discussions will help them to dramatically improve their language proficiency.

Study conducted by Horst (2005) also showed the benefits of extensive reading. According to the author, previous research on this topic had not fully examined the effectiveness of the extensive reading on expansion of students’ vocabulary. He conducted extensive reading program to twenty one adult immigrants, who were studying at Montreal community centre. The group met twice a week during a six week period, spending 3 hours together each class. Overall, students were given thirty-five graded readers of different levels; and they were free to choose and read any book they prefer. By the end of six weeks each of them read on average 10.2 books. One hour of the class was devoted to discussion of the book, completion of the worksheets, and vocabulary notebooks. The author used a pre-/post test method. For this he took part of the part of the books and electronically scanned them. Then with the help of the lexical frequency profiling software he divided the words from the readers into four categories. The last step was creating and using a hundred-word checklist for pre-and post-tests. Results show that the extensive reading program was successful, and students were able to learn half of the words from off-list category- less frequent words- occurred in the graded readers.

The main peculiarity of the extensive reading is that learners are recommended to choose materials which are “near or even below their current level” (Renandya, 2007, p. 145), this is done to make comprehension easier and reading experience more enjoyable, therefore majority of learners usually choose graded readers for extensive reading. According to Hill (1997), graded readers are ‘extended texts, mostly fiction, written in the language reduced in terms of structures and vocabulary’ (p. 57). Many researchers have used graded readers in their studies (Horst, 2005; Suk, 2017; Bell, 2001; Waring, 1997; Waring & Takaki, 2003) and proved that graded readers are beneficial not only in expanding student’ vocabulary, but also in developing reading comprehension, reading speed, reading strategies, and in general, help to improve students’ language proficiency.

However, it is a well-known fact that graded readers, namely adapted and abridged texts, may sound unnatural due to the fact that vocabulary and grammatical structures are simplified according to the level of students. Hafiz and Tudor (1990) also argue that due to simplified syntactic structures and lack of complexity of graded readers, there is a possibility that syntactic features in a foreign language will not be developed. It means that graded readers may be less beneficial for intermediate/upper-intermediate learners and may not contribute to overcoming intermediate plateau. Moreover, as it has been mentioned above, the language learnt by means of graded readers, may lack the characteristics of natural speech, which is considered as one of the main reasons why students hit the plateau. It is recommended for teachers to find authentic materials that will correspond to students’ levels of proficiency.

In another study on extensive reading conducted by Nishino (2007) both graded readers and authentic books were used to investigate Japanese middle school students’ motivation to read in English and the strategies they used while extensively reading. The author chose Harry Potter 4, Harry Potter 5, and Stravaganza as authentic reading materials for the participants. According to the results, during the 2,5-year study students’ reading comprehension and intrinsic motivation increased, each of the students developed their own strategies to read and to comprehend the texts. At first, when their proficiency level was lower, they enjoyed reading graded books; however, after finishing Harry Potter 4, they lost their interest for graded books and did not find them enjoying anymore, so they continued reading authentic books. This research demonstrates that intermediate/upper-intermediate level students might not prefer reading graded books, as the result their motivation to read may decrease as well. Despite the fact that Nishino did not investigate students’ vocabulary acquisition, her study might be useful and helpful for teachers in their choice of appropriate materials for higher level students. In fact, there are not so many studies devoted to investigating the effect of extensive reading on intermediate and above level students.

It is worth mentioning that extensive reading is not a panacea for all the problems that students may face when hitting the learning plateau. However, taking into consideration all the above mentioned information, it is clear that extensive reading proved to be a good way to enlarge students’ vocabulary and overall improve their foreign language proficiency.

D. Teachers’ Role in Helping Learners Overcome the Plateau

Many researchers come to the conclusion that teacher’s role is crucial in helping learners to overcome the plateau. Yi (2011), for instance, claims that a teacher’s role is so important, that she can prevent plateau stage even before students hit it. One way of addressing plateau is adjusting teaching techniques and teaching philosophy. Another way is that

teachers should encourage students at the plateau stage, be patient and tolerant of students' errors; teacher's anxiety will only worsen the situation.

Thus, first and foremost, teachers should be aware of the plateau phenomenon in the language learning; without this knowledge they will be unable to help their students. Secondly, as an integral part of the learning process, teachers may also struggle a lot when they do not see the outcomes of their teaching. So this is an important period not only for a student, but also for a teacher, as a good and positive rapport between them may become a key for successfully overcoming the plateau. However, it needs to be pointed that the plateau phenomenon in the language learning is not studied properly. Furthermore, it should be highlighted, that in almost all the studies researches were focused on the factors contributing to the plateau and on some pedagogical implications for addressing it, but no studies were conducted on the teachers' perceptions of the plateau and what strategies are being used in practice to overcome it. It means that we do not have a clear understanding of what the actual picture is.

II. METHOD

A. *Research Questions*

This study explores English teachers' perceptions of language learning plateau, how to overcome it, and seeks teachers' practical recommendations by answering the following research questions:

1. What are the perceptions of teachers of the language learning plateau?
2. What strategies do teachers use in helping students overcome the language learning plateau?

B. *Method of Data Collection*

This study uses a semi-structured interview as the method of data collection. Wellington (2015) states that interviews are 'designed to elicit views and perspectives' and can 'reach the parts which other methods cannot reach'. Unlike other methods, through interviewing we can investigate the things which are not easily observable or measurable, such as interviewees' views, perceptions, thoughts and feelings (Wellington, 2015).

According to Creswell (2013), qualitative researchers are considered as key instruments in the study, and they usually employ instruments which are designed by them using open-ended questions. In semi-structured interviews researchers tend to use a checklist or a guideline with a list of questions; they have a flexibility in arranging the order of these questions and their wordings, and adjust them depending on situations (Merriam, 2009; Wellington, 2015). Much in the same way, Creswell (2013) assumes that forms of data collection and questions might be modified in the process of conducting research once the researcher begins collecting data.

The researcher used different types of interviewing modes which are convenient for participants, such as telephone, face-to-face or online interviews via Zoom or Webex. Interviews were conducted in English and lasted from thirty to fifty-five minutes. Interviews were audio-recorded with the permission of the participants and then transcribed for the analysis.

C. *Research Participants*

Participants of this research are 10 English teachers who teach students from intermediate to advanced levels. All the participants are females. Their years of teaching experience vary from 1 to 17 years. There are 2 university teachers, 2 state school teachers, and 6 teachers from private language centres. There is a probability that the participants may have encountered the problem of plateauing, because it is believed that foreign language learners usually hit plateau at the intermediate level (Richards, 2008), and they may have had students in upper-intermediate and advanced levels who successfully overcome the plateau. Thus, they can share their experiences and recommendations to address this problem.

D. *Data Analysis*

Data is analysed using the following six-step thematic analysis introduced by Braun and Clarke (2006): familiarising yourself with your data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, producing the report. According to Braun and Clarke (2006) the thematic analysis is "searching across the data to find repeated patterns of meanings" (p. 86). The first step includes transcription of the interviews, reading and re-reading of the transcribed data; all verbal and non-verbal utterances, such as coughs, pauses should be retained in the transcript (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This step is very important, as a researcher starts creating meanings and interpreting the data when transcribing and reading the collected data (Bird, 2005; Lapadat & Lindsay, 1999). The second step is initial coding, where codes are assigned to chunks or segments in the transcript to identify reoccurring patterns (Miles et al., 2014), and combining the data relevant to each code (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The next step is combining the codes into themes and sub-themes, which can be done using tables and maps with codes and their small descriptions (Braun & Wilkinson, 2003). The fourth step is reviewing the themes by deleting or combining them, ensuring that extracts are relevant to the themes, and finalising the map (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The fifth step is giving names to the themes, which appear in the final work, and finally, the last step is selecting appropriate extracts and writing up the analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

E. *Ethical Considerations*

Participation in the research was on a voluntary basis and the researcher took measures to protect the confidentiality of the participants. The researcher substituted the participants' real names with pseudonyms and did not indicate their workplaces. Interviews were recorded only with the permission of the participants. Audio recordings of the interviews, transcriptions and other written materials are stored on researcher's personal tablet in a separate folder with the adequate protection (password, researcher's fingerprint). The researcher ensured that the purpose and the content of the research were understood by all the participants. Written consent was obtained from the participants prior to collecting data. Final work is given for participants' review of the researcher's interpretation of their stories, perceptions and words.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. *The Language Learning Plateau Term Is not Well-Known Among Teachers and Students*

The majority of those interviewed suggested that there is a lack of awareness of the language learning plateau term among both EFL teachers and the language learners. Some of the teachers even stated that they were first introduced to such a term due to the invitation to participate in the given research. However, the concept itself was familiar.

Further, almost all of the teachers highlighted the importance and actuality of the problem, and that it should be properly explained to students in order to avoid many different issues they are facing because of it. The following vignettes illustrate this point:

When I was first introduced to this topic, I did not know that it existed. I think that every teacher should be aware of this problem. Because if you do not know what the plateau is, you do not know that your students are having it. The problem is actually very important and needs to be solved (Participant 4).

Well, actually I do not think that they know exactly this term, but they just feel that they got stuck. It is important to let them know about it (Participant 8).

Surprisingly, three interviewees even claimed that they are still experiencing the language learning plateau themselves; however, they also did not know that such problem existed. Because of the lack of knowledge about the problem, they suffered from the idea that they have no aptitude for learning a foreign language, they doubted their abilities. The following vignettes illustrate this point:

I think I am myself in this plateau. Sometimes I just feel that my language skills are not sufficient enough. I start doubting myself as a teacher, as a person who speaks English (Participant 1).

Well when I was a learner I did not know about it, and I thought: I am stupid, I cannot learn the language. It was very difficult. Unfortunately, nobody told me that there was a term like learning plateau (Participant 3).

B. *A Comfort Zone Feeling Is One of the Indicators of the Plateau*

Over half of the participants suggested that intermediate and upper-intermediate level students usually have quite good level of language proficiency; by the time they reach these levels, they may have developed all four skills, such as listening, reading, writing and speaking considerably to the point that they can comfortably use the language and be easily understood by the native speakers. So most of the times students think that the level they have is enough to communicate, and they do not need further improvement. However, this might be the time to make some changes, as it indicates that students probably hit the language learning plateau. This can be illustrated by the following vignette:

This usually happens when children are experienced enough; they feel comfortable with the knowledge which they already have. It is like a zone of comfort, I think, when they do not really need to improve anything. Learning is too comfortable both for a teacher and for a student, and that is the point where people have to understand that they need to change something (Participant 5).

Some teachers believe that students in plateau might feel as if they have reached their maximum, because they do not see the results of their hard work, and they find it difficult to move further for different reasons. Since they are already independent language users, they just do not change the situation.

Maybe they think that it is all they can do or able to do, and they do not need to improve their current situation, because it is too difficult (Participant 2).

A small number of those interviewed suggested that students in plateau, because they do not see visible results of their work, stop learning for some time and then come back in order to practice and not forget that they already know. One interviewee said that for one of her students did attend classes regularly; she took individual classes from time to time, because for her it was more important to remain at the same level than going up to the next one.

She is still learning English to practice her speaking. She tries to keep it at the same level, so that she makes maybe a little progress, but more importantly that she does not make a regress (Participant 10).

C. *Peers, Affective Factors, and Relationship With a Teacher Important Factors Leading to the Language Learning Plateau*

When the participants were asked about the reasons leading to the plateau, each participant gave several possible reasons, such as lack of motivation, grades, the lack of practice and discipline, and tens of others. However, the majority of the interviewees highlighted the following factors to be the most influential: peers, affective factors, and relationship with a teacher. Participants believe that students who are shy and not confident enough, those who have low self-esteem tend to hit the plateau more often compared to the ones who have high self-esteem and are outspoken. This point is in

agreement with the findings of Zapata-Becerra, which show that the above mentioned affective factors cause the plateau (2001). Such students tend to have difficulties in speaking mostly, in those activities, where they have to communicate with others. There is also the assumption that more extraverted students tend to succeed in the language learning (Littlewood, 1984; Brown, 1980; Mcdonough, 1981).

She was not ready not because her English was poor, but mostly because of her emotional conception, the anxiety. She could not believe she had enough knowledge to be successful (Participant 10).

First of all, psychological barriers, they were too shy to speak with natives. They were sometimes afraid when they came to our discussion club, they were afraid to say a word (Participant 5).

Some participants argued that peers are crucial when seeking a solution to the problem of plateauing, because they are the ones who can make the negative sides of plateau reinforced, or vice versa, they can help a student to move beyond the plateau and help to overcome those problems. Especially, if the plateau appeared as the result of some affective factors, such as, anxiety and frustration, teachers should change students' learning environments, groups and peers; their combination might worsen the situation with plateau.

We need to choose groups carefully for them. One of my students could not improve in her previous group, because her ex-group mates, as she said, were more competitive, like "A" students, the smartest ones. So she was afraid to make mistakes in front of them (Participant 6).

Peers actually have this powerful influence. I have one weak class, and they are weak, because they feel like they are weak, they already perceive themselves weak. And it is not a problem of one student - the whole class think that they are weak, and they stopped kind of studying (Participant 9).

Interviewees also expressed the opinions that teachers themselves can make students enter the plateau because of different reasons: sometimes there is a misunderstanding between them, they might not get on very well, teaching and learning styles of the teacher and the student might not suit, or simply, the student might not like the teacher. In this case students usually start missing classes, stop learning and making progress.

It can also be teachers, why not? If there is any conflict, for example, with teacher, or that student does not like the teacher, or there is a communication failure or connection problems, then that might be another reason to stop learning or maybe to stop progressing (Participant 9).

D. Students in the Plateau Face Difficulties in Grammar Accuracy and Vocabulary Richness

All the participants claimed that students struggle with speaking, namely, there is the lack of vocabulary and problems with the grammar accuracy. Teachers said that students in the plateau have limited vocabulary, because they are not able to activate newly learned words, meaning that they usually have them in their passive vocabulary. When asked spontaneously, they are not able to use them in their speech. That is the reason why they keep over using a lower level vocabulary, which comprises their active vocabulary.

They know the words, they can use them in writing, they can understand them in texts, but they cannot use them in their speech (Participant 1).

Vocabulary is a huge problem for us. For example, we learn new vocabulary, but after some time, they forget everything and start using "simple", elementary level vocabulary (Participant 2).

As for the grammar, the common problem shared among the interviewees was about the grammar accuracy. Teachers believe that the root cause of such grammar mistakes is fossilisation, so called learned mistakes, which are very persistent and difficult to get rid of. According to the participants, explaining-and re-explaining the rules and structures do not improve the situation.

Of course, they know present simple, they for sure can tell its usage and structure, but when they start speaking, they usually forget the things like, endings -s, -es, for example. They fully understand how to use it, but cannot use it in practice (Participant 4).

Speaking and writing are usually about his learned mistakes (Participant 3).

E. The Most Challenging Thing About Teaching Students in the Plateau is Motivating Them

All the participants suggested that motivating students is the most challenging part of their work. Moreover, one third of the teachers have also indicated the lack of the motivation as the main factor which can lead to the language learning plateau. It means that they completely understand the importance of it in the students' learning experiences. Yet most of them expressed their frustration about not being able to motivate their students for a long period of time, as they tend to quickly lose their motivation when faced with new difficulties and challenges in their learning process.

I do not know how I can extra motivate this student; I find it challenging (Participant 9).

Motivating them is really difficult, because, even though I give some interesting and challenging assignments they lose their motivation quickly (Participant 7).

Priority for now is to keep them motivated. But I have no idea how to do it, like, nothing works on them (Participant 6).

This finding is in agreement with Richards' (2008) work which showed that students in the intermediate and upper-intermediate levels are not that excited about learning the foreign language compared to the times when they have just started learning it. Thus, it becomes more difficult to motivate and make them learn.

F. EFL Teachers Might Experience Negative Feelings Due to the Plateau

Almost two thirds of the participants said that they understand that plateau is a natural thing and they should not be too pessimistic about it, though they feel sorry about their students. However, there were some EFL teachers who stated that they sometimes felt anxious and even depressed about their students' results, because they were responsible for their learning process. For some of them it felt like a burden, others started blaming themselves. So it means that plateau affects emotionally not only the students, but also the teachers. Below is the illustration of such example:

That he is not progressing is not a burden only on him, but it's also a burden for me. I start asking my colleagues how to deal with these learned mistakes, because no matter how hard I try, he is still having these issues, so it bothers me. Maybe my teaching methods are not working out, they are not well enough, they do not suit him. I start seeking for problems in me, my teaching, and it feels like a burden (Participant 9).

G. Supportive Environment, Praising and Good Relationships With Students Key to Overcoming the Plateau

When the participants were asked to give recommendations to their colleagues who might have students in the plateau phase, the common answers among them were supporting, praising, and being friendly with their students. They all agreed that students in the plateau are those who need constant support from the teacher's side, as they already might feel frustrated because of their situation. According to the participants, the teacher might be the only person who observes students' struggles, knows all of their mistakes and weaknesses in their language learning journey, so she is the one who needs to help them move beyond the plateau. One interviewee compared the plateau to swimming; she said that even though a person knows the techniques of swimming, and maybe tried to swim herself, she still needs someone to assist her when swimming, so does the language learner in the plateau, although she has developed some skills to speak the foreign language, she still needs someone to support, to tell that she can do it.

I could not swim until I was 20 years old, and once I started learning. My boyfriend taught me to swim. One day he and I were swimming, and I was swimming, and I could not believe that I was swimming. So when the next time I was alone, I could not do it myself, because I needed someone who tells me I am ready, or assists me. So I guess that's one of the examples of plateau. Because like in this case, you have the skills, but you do not accept or do not truly understand or process that you already own those skills (Participant 10).

Half of the interviewees expressed the belief that the atmosphere in the class should be friendly and supportive too. Students should not be scared to talk or worried to make mistakes. They should feel comfortable, especially those who are shy and are afraid to speak in English. Participants emphasized that teacher's positive attitude towards her students, tolerance to their repeated mistakes will return in the form of students' improvements and progress.

Do not spread negativity, spread positivity. Try to understand, be in their shoes. If you do not blame each other and try to learn together, there will be no failure, even if there is no progress (Participant 9).

English should be fun, not scary (Participant 2).

Some of the participants gave advice to praise the students in plateau, as they already have low motivation to learn, and most of the times feel worried about their mistakes. However, they argued that the praise should not be for the sake of praise, but it should be reasonable, because students usually know their weak sides. If to praise them for every small detail, they will not take teacher's praise seriously. It should be done to reinforce their real accomplishments. One of the teachers shared her experience, saying that she sometimes gave her student in plateau the tasks that he could manage to do well and afterward praised him for that. It was done to increase his motivation, according to her words. The following vignettes illustrate it:

I try to praise them considerably by showing their strong sides in assignments, examinations, in the classroom (Participant 7).

I gave the tasks that they could handle, and then praised them for that (Participant 8).

H. Use a Variety of Learning Approaches Helps to Successfully Overcome the Plateau

Since the majority of students in plateau have difficulties in speaking skills, namely the lack of vocabulary, teachers mostly shared the activities that they used to practice speaking; most importantly, those activities that worked well and eventually helped their students overcome the language learning plateau. Almost all the teachers found utilizing active learning most useful in developing speaking skills. Such activities included speaking and debate clubs, making projects and presentations, watching and discussing films and various video materials, peer feed-backing, group and pair works, and playing games. Participant stated that the above mentioned activities motivated students, attracted them to continue to learn the language, and somehow helped to move them beyond the plateau.

I mean engaging students, making them work in groups and pairs, move, teach each other, do the projects – to actively engage them (Participant 9).

We concentrated on using new words and on making projects (Participant 1).

Over the half of the participants highlighted that using games was very useful, students were interested in them. Games helped students feel at ease, to relax and forget about their mistakes, which they always tried to control. Interviewees stated that using games worked well in different age groups - both with adults and teenagers. Several teachers suggested that gamification is the best method that helps to solve a lot of problems connected to the plateau. Vignettes below present teachers' opinion about using games:

Everyone likes playing games, even adults, because they are just grown up kids, so you can use more games to

practice active speaking (Participant 10).

I tried to use games, you know the most popular and trendy ones like, Kahoot, Wordwall, team games, and even Mafia. They were helpful and students loved them (Participant 2).

Almost half of the interviewees recommended attending speaking clubs. Most of them mentioned the speaking clubs organized by the American Corners, if there are some in their cities, because of the English speaking environment and other interesting events for students. Teachers claim that most of the people attending these clubs have the purpose of improving their speaking skills, so students will find people to practice their speaking. In addition to that, they might have common problems and can work on their skills together without worry, because there is no assessment and judging in such clubs. Students are free in many aspects, like choosing the topic, or sharing their opinions freely.

My student is attending the American Corner, where speaking clubs and debates are organized weekly. Each lesson one of them is picked to be a facilitator of the whole session. So he got really interested and inspired in it. It helps to keep him motivated to work (Participant 1).

When it comes to the passive learning, the majority of the participants found listening to podcasts as one of the most helpful activities, because first of all, it improves students' listening skills: they start to get used to native speakers' different accents, natural flow and speed of their speeches. Second reason is its availability; listening to podcasts does not require special preparation, equipment or additional materials, as students usually use their mobile phones for that. There is also a possibility to listen to them anywhere - on the way to school, to work, on the bus, and so on.

He has been listening to some podcasts while walking, while commuting to school. So he did pretty well on his last examination. He said that it actually helped, because now he can understand the fluency, the flow of native speakers (Participant 3).

In general, the interviewees mentioned that in order to make real progress in the foreign language learning, it is important to combine active and passive learning activities. The reason is that active learning is useful in waking students up, making them activate all the knowledge they already have, whereas passive learning helps to support the gained knowledge and, in some ways, to check their progress.

I. Authentic Materials and Native English Speakers Important for Overcoming the Plateau

The majority of those interviewed suggested that using authentic materials in teaching students in the plateau phase is quite helpful. In their opinion, nowadays it is not appropriate to teach students using old academic textbooks with the information that is not topical anymore, which is common in Kazakhstan and many post-soviet union countries, for example. Teachers believe that materials should be more up-to-date, more valid to students, to their interests and to their lives. They could be interested in discussing current news, current situations happening in the world, their favourite series or popular TV shows.

Whenever I have time, I try to show them TedTalks videos, parts from different movies. Once we watched the Night show together. Such authentic materials, listening to native English speakers, make you closer to the language, I think (Participant 6).

By authentic materials the participants mean not only video, audio or printed materials, but also some socio-cultural events that will introduce the students to the culture and traditions of the foreign country. From one hand such events might educate students, from another hand they can attract students, inspire them and keep them motivated, in general. The vignette below this point:

In 2008 there were elections in the USA, when Barack Obama won. So we conducted mock elections - so called false elections. We called our students and they voted for their presidents. There were about 10 American Corners in Kazakhstan and we were connected with the Embassy (Participant 5).

Approximately two-thirds of the interviewees suggested that communication with the native English speakers can be a good way to improve speaking, and eventually can help in overcoming the plateau. According to the participants, it can be beneficial for students in several ways. First of all, being able to understand and to be understood by a native speaker might boost students' confidence; they might feel that they are independent users of the language and hopefully will get rid of their psychological barriers. Second, they will get used to the flow and speed of the native speakers. Finally, with all the above mentioned, it may speed up the progress of the learner in the learning process. The vignette below this point:

Our students made lots of friends among Americans. I could see our students have changed, their language became more authentic. They lost maybe barriers and became fluent (Participant 5).

IV. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this study was to explore EFL teachers' perceptions of the language learning plateau and to identify the recommendations teachers have for their colleagues who might have students in the plateau phase. This study has shown that there is a lack of awareness of the term among EFL teachers. Yet the idea of the plateau was familiar. Surprisingly, some teachers are found to be in the plateau themselves. It turned out that not only students, but also teachers can have negative feelings due to the plateau. Another finding showed that teachers struggle with motivating students in this phase. Finally, teachers shared some useful strategies that helped their students to move beyond the plateau.

The findings from this study make valuable contributions to the existing literature by exploring the problem of plateauing from the teachers' side, sharing their perceptions, opinions and thoughts, and gives practical recommendations to other teachers, or those who hit the plateau.

The current research was limited by the number of participants. Another limitation was the absence of a small questionnaire regarding teacher's backgrounds; it could have speeded up the data transcription and data analysis process.

Another possible area of future research would be to investigate the language proficiency levels of Kazakhstani school teachers and understand if there are any teachers experiencing the plateau. Other areas in which it would be important to develop further research are language learning plateau issues in English medium instruction, which is actively implemented in Kazakhstan and beyond (Nurshatayeva, 2020; Nurshatayeva & Page, 2020). Finally, it would be important to explore how advanced technology solutions such as chatbots (Nurshatayeva et al., 2020, 2021) would help learners overcome the plateau.

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Dinara Utegulova is an EFL teacher at the Department of World Languages at K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University. Her research focuses on areas such as language learning plateau, extensive reading, and the professional development of EFL teachers.

Kulpash Koptleuova is an Associate Professor of Linguistics at Baishev University. Her research interests are in the areas of Theory of Language, Languages in contact, Multilingual Education and EFL.

Nurkhanym Bauyrzhan is a Senior lecturer at the Department of English and German languages at the Zhubanov University. Her research interests are English literature, Comparative Linguistics, English for specific purposes.

Sandugash Mukhtarova is a Senior lecturer of the Department of English and German languages at K. Zhubanov Aktobe Regional University. Her fields of research are Translation of Non-equivalent vocabulary, Comparative Linguistics, AI in Teaching.

Akhmaral Khairzhanova is an Associate Professor of the Department of Translation Studies and Foreign Languages at Kh. Dosmukhamedov Atyrau University. Her main research interests: theory and practice of translation, modern methods and technologies of teaching foreign languages.

Danagul Assylzhanova is a PhD student of the Kazakh Ablai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages at the Department of Teacher training on languages and literature. Her research interests are Multilingual education, Foreign Language Teaching and English learning.