

Do (EFL) Learners need to be “Perfect”?

By: Maaouia Haj Mabrouk

We all strive for perfection in everything we do. We unequivocally believe that reaching the perfection standard secures a “win-win” state of mind, thus endows us with that feeling of quiescence and self-satisfaction. In the field of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teaching and learning, the acclaimed stage of “perfect” performance is that wherein the learner is expected to use the language perfectly, manipulate syntactic structures with easiness, speak eloquently, and write coherently and accurately. EFL teachers strive to help their students reach the level of performance that nears perfection. They often douse them with work sheets and quizzes, thinking that this is the path that would lead them to attain excellence. However, research has proven that too much clinging to a “perfect” standard of performance may have drastic effects on students’ self-confidence and willingness to learn. The present article purports to highlight the effects of perfection and perfectionism on students and to suggest classroom activities which would leverage their performance without negatively affecting their self-esteem or their ability to accumulate knowledge.

Defining Perfection and Perfectionism

Perfection springs from the Latin word “perficere” which means to complete or to finish doing something. In modern times, it has gradually evolved to mean to do something in an excellent way and with no mistakes. Perfectionism, on the other hand, is a person’s tendency to set very high standards for their own performance and to hold a constant feeling of being under the urge of reaching those standards. Psychotherapist Cohen (2018, paragraph 3) argues that perfectionism is

“that feeling you get when you expect things of yourself that you’d never expect from others. It’s working yourself to exhaustion in hopes that you’ll feel whole, complete, worthy.” In recent years, there has been a growing interest in decorticating the meaning of perfection and perfectionism in the field of language learning. A stock pile of studies conducted by researchers and psychotherapists (Hewitt and Flett, 1991; Lamott, 1995; Brophy, 1999; Flett & Hewitt, 2014; Rich, 2017; Cohen, 2018 amongst others) have shed light on perfectionism and on the attitudes of perfectionist students. The American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) has identified the characteristics of perfection in language learning. According to ACTFL (2012, p. 4), a learner has perfect command of the language when they acquire the “ability to use language in real world situations in a spontaneous interaction and non-rehearsed context and in a manner acceptable and appropriate to native speakers of the language,” regardless of how, where or when the language is learned. In other words, a learner who has “perfect” command of the language they are learning speak and write the language accurately, make use of rich vocabulary, deploy excellent communication strategies and display a high degree of cultural awareness. ACTFL (ibid) also identifies “5” goal areas of perfectionism, generally referred to as the “5 Cs”. They are communication, communities, cultures, connections and comparisons. Students yearning for perfection need to display command of these goal areas.

Characteristics of Perfectionist Students

Generally speaking, people tend to be perfectionist by nature. They hate paucity and are imbued with projects which, they presume, would turn their lives into complete success. We may even claim that in the language we speak, certain syntactic structures, such as the superlative forms, are proof of our innate yearning for perfection. Rich (2017) stipulates that perfectionism happens in three forms. It is “self-directed” when one has very high standards about their own performance and

feel frustrated when such standards are not achieved. It may be “socially-prescribed” when others, such as parents or teachers, put extremely-high expectations on learners and coerce them into excellent performance. It is also “other-oriented” when a child, for instance, does his/her utmost to pick up on their parents’ perception of perfect performance. Research has proven that young generations of students are growing more and more perfectionist (Frost, Marten, Lahart and Rosenblate, 1990; Hewitt and Flett, 1991; Shafran, Cooper and Fairburn, 2002; Gregersen and Horwitz, 2002 amongst others) and that the tendency of being perfect is on the rise in recent years. Cohen (2018, paragraph 6) ascertains: “our culture puts a ton of pressure on us to be perfect. We’re made to feel as if there’s something wrong with us.” Pacht (1984) catalogued the main characteristics of perfectionist learners. They:

- Set extremely high standards of performance,
- Consider failure in everything that is less than perfect,
- Are never satisfied with what they have achieved because it is just what they expected,
- Are motivated by fear of failure, rather than by the pursuit of success,
- See their real value in the excellence of what they do,
- Keep procrastinating starting a task because everything they do must be perfect.

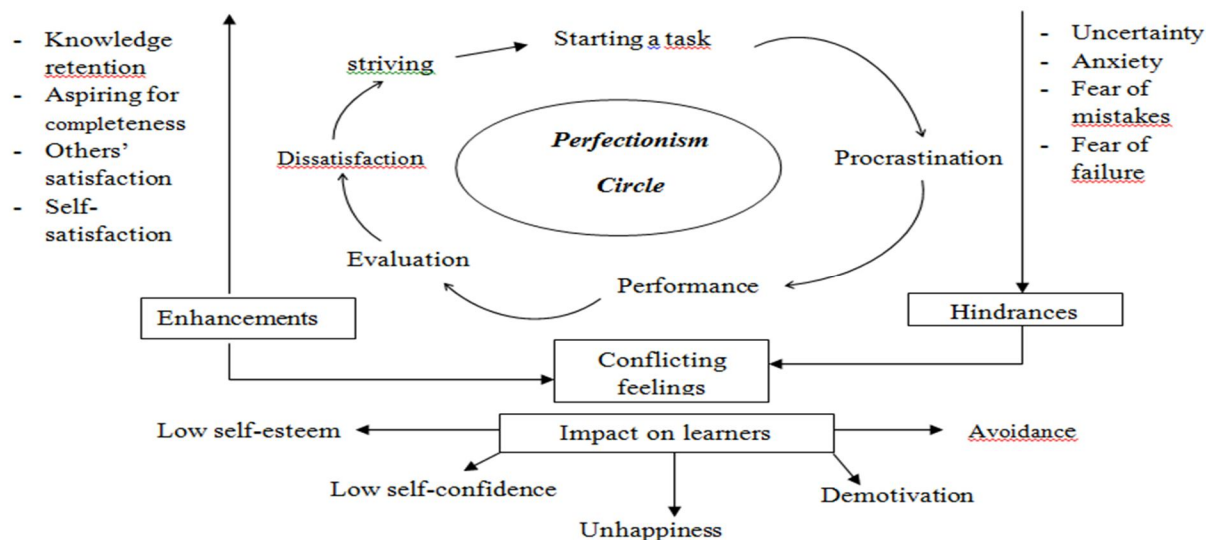
If teachers were trained to recognize the characteristics of perfectionist students, they would be empowered to redirect the students’ yearning for perfection and to use it as an impetus rather than as a hindrance for good performance.

The “Curse” of Perfection

To begin with, there are no perfect teachers. There are no perfect students, either. Yet all people yearn for perfection and completeness. History has shown that even on the verge of death, people

are still imbued with the need to be perfect. Ward and Allen (2004, p. 92) report that when the Mexican revolutionary leader, Pancho Villa, was about to be shot dead, he lost all words and so shouted at the journalists: “Don’t let it end like this. Tell them I said something!” The leader could not bear the fact of being unable to express himself. Similarly, Vespasian (the Roman emperor: 69 - 79 AD) did attempt to stand up while dying. His last words were: “An emperor should die on his feet.” The American actor and film producer, Douglas Fairbanks, died saying: “I’ve never felt better.” The examples that have just been evoked prove that a feeling of incompleteness and underachievement always accompanies the search for perfection; which ultimately brings about a feeling of guiltiness for not being able to go beyond what is expected. Lamott (1995) highlights the detrimental effects of perfectionism. She (ibid, p. 28) argues that perfectionism is “the enemy of the people. It will keep you cramped and insane your whole life.” A perfectionist student always has an urge to act, to trespass their capacities and their peers, to do their utmost to please others, teachers and parents, and to compete for results rather than for learning. Perfectionism nourishes qualms along with an everlasting feeling of anxiety. Lamott (1995) explains that perfectionism causes cramps and wounds which lead students to work in an unpleasant mood and prevent them from relishing the real taste of school life. Similarly, Cohen (2018, paragraph 4) argues: “Perfectionism lives and breathes in your fear of making a mistake. When you’re afraid of what might happen, you don’t always make the best possible choices.” It is also “basing your self-worth on external accomplishments, feeling like you have something to prove all the time,” (ibid, paragraph 3). Students who are infatuated by the need to be perfect generally undergo an ongoing disturbed state of mind. Whether their results are excellent or not, their fears and anxieties would never come to an end. The pressure to achieve perfect performance, albeit appreciated by parents and magnified by teachers, reduces students’ happiness, curbs their pleasure to learn and drastically impacts their self-

esteem. The figure below shows the vicious circle of striving for perfection and the effects this may have on students' state of mind.



The figure above shows that perfectionist students undergo daunting learning experiences characterized by the co-existence of conflicting feelings. On the one hand, they aspire for perfection and for satisfying themselves, their parents and their teachers. On the other hand, they are torn by persisting feelings of anxiety and apprehension; which leads to a perpetual state of discomfort, unhappiness and demotivation, to the extent that they may avoid taking risks with learning.

So What?

Students should know there is more to learning than perfect results. In an EFL context, both teachers and students should know that learning a foreign language is a challenging process and that myriad variables interfere with that process, including cognitive and emotional factors. Flett and Hewitt (2014) argue that perfectionism may be quite destructive and may even lead to depression and suicide. Gregersen and Horwitz (2002, p. 562) stipulate: "In the case of foreign or second language learning, fear of negative evaluation is likely to be manifested in a student's over concern with academic and personal evaluations of his or her performance and competence in the target

language;” which brings about a constant feeling of anxiety. As a matter of fact, Teachers should be trained to recognize perfectionist students and how to deal with them. They should lead learners to know that schools are places where they learn skills, knowledge and good communication manners, and that “perfect” performance does not actually exist. Tyers and Sillito (2018) highlight the role of teacher education and training in shaping students’ attitudes toward learning and towards school life.

Parents should second their children in their studies and should not exert pressure on them, as coercing them into perfection may have indelible effects on their self-esteem and self-confidence. Hewitt (2014) points out that the message that children get from their parents to be perfect usually has detrimental effects on their self-esteem. Hilgers (2019, paragraph 1) also stipulates that parents who do not tolerate their children’s imperfections do so because they do not tolerate their own underachievement. She argues: “Mothers and fathers, who strive for perfection often, ironically, do their children more harm than good.”

As for students, they should be convinced that there is more to learning than fear of mistakes, as mistakes are part of learning, and that FAIL is the acronym of “**F**irst **A**tttempt **I**n **L**earning.” In fact, when Edison was trying to invent the light bulb, he declared: “I haven’t failed. I’ve just found 10,000 ways that won’t work,” (Nelson, 2016, paragraph 7). Similarly, in a speech she delivered at the 2008 Harvard graduation ceremony, J. K. Rowling, the author of the Harry Potter series evokes “the benefits of failure”. She claims that it was thanks to failure that she could strip away from what she was not, and could start doing what really mattered to her. Students should also know that there is no need to devalue themselves because of mistakes or low performance, and that it is much more constructive to gauge their own progress from one level of performance to another than to be envious of other students’ achievements.

Classroom practice may help improve students' performance without damaging their self-esteem by the burden of perfection. In fact, a plethora of classroom activities are thought to be efficient at enhancing students' learning skills and installing an ambiance of enjoyment in the classroom, particularly if accompanied by appropriate teacher attitudes

Performance Enhancing Activities

Perfectionist students should be led to relearn the norms of school performance and to redefine their expectations about school work. This would require carefully planned classroom activities, well-sequenced learning opportunities and teaching approaches which emphasize collaboration, pleasure and information processing. The table below lists some activities that are supposed to boost students' performance, along with appropriate teacher attitudes and corresponding assessment tools.

Samples of performance enhancing activities				
	Classroom activity	Benefits	Teacher enhancement strategies	Assessment tools
1	Group work/ pair work	-Collaboration rather than competition -Mutual help -Recognition of the roles of individuals and groups in constructing knowledge...	-respect of students' time on task -setting an appropriate context	-formative assessment tools (portfolios, journals, graphic designers, mind maps...)
2	Arts-integrated activities (plays, film and video making, songs...)	-Complementarity between group members -appropriate body language -responsibility -self-esteem -enjoyment -resilience and perseverance...	appropriate error correction strategies -providing adequate feedback	-peer correction (students correct one another's compositions)
3	games	-pleasant learning atmosphere -motivation -mutual respect	-varying the learning aids...	-self-correction/ self-

		-collaboration while playing...	-varying classroom activities	evaluation (via well-devised rubrics and checklists)....
4	Class debates	-self-confidence -turn taking -respect -tolerance	-valuing effort and process rather than results	
5	Web quests	-wider spectrum of knowledge and exchange cooperation	-differentiating instruction...	
6	Class projects	-collaboration in cooperative performance, not in individual perfectionism.		

The table above displays a number of classroom activities which have proven to be effective in improving students' performance and shepherd them out of the vicious circle of perfectionism. The suggested activities are meant to promote collaborative work, mutual respect, curiosity about knowledge, risk taking and good manners. These are, in fact, the qualities youth would need when they step out of school to join the labor market. The table also recommends certain work methods and attitudes teachers should adopt so as to assist their students' progress from one stage of learning to another. The last column of the table suggests certain student-friendly assessment tools which are claimed efficient at gleaning useful information about students' process and progress. Emphasis is put on formative methods of assessment including portfolios, journals and diaries. In fact, whilst summative assessment aims to categorize students as high and low achievers and views some as better than others, in an ambiance of scornful competitiveness, formative assessment triggers mutual progress, complementarity and togetherness.

Conclusion

Perfectionism is more and more ubiquitous nowadays, studies say. Driven by the need to please themselves and others, and by the race for **job** high job positions, the young generations are increasingly imbued with the need to be perfect. Yet perfectionism is most of the time detrimental because it is always accompanied by perplexing anxieties that one is still not doing their best and that they have not yet been good enough. The present article has shed light on the potential drawbacks of perfectionism and on its drastic effects on students' cognitive and emotional growth. It has also shed light on a number of classroom activities which may help redefine the purposes of learning and redirect students' enthusiasm and energy toward setting the common goals of collaboration, creativity and critical thinking. Teacher training should now focus on efficient ways to reach these goals and on how to position the students within the frames of the 21st century.

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Biographical Notes about the author

Maaouia Haj Mabrouk is an ELT senior inspector and a teacher trainer from Tunisia. She works with teachers on ways of improving their classroom practice and on making learning English an enjoyable experience for students. This obviously entails striving with new methods of teaching and with alternative tools of assessment. Her interests encompass, but are not restricted to, culture and language, learner motivation and arts integration in English teaching/learning. Maaouia obtained her Agrégation in English literature and linguistics from the University of Manuba, Tunisia, in 2012 and is defending her Ph.D in English teaching methodology very soon. Maaouia was also the Tunisian Ministry of Education delegate at the 2015 IATEFL Conference in Manchester, England. She also participated in the internship program that took place in Austin, Texas, at the Texas International Education Consortium (TIEC), from February 9 through March 3, 2019.

Phone number: (216) 96 605 179

e-mail: mayaenglish@gmail.com