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Professional qualities of an effective English language teacher: as seen by Taiwanese university students

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ABSTRACT

An effective teacher plays a crucial role in the process of learning English as a foreign language (EFL) when students' opportunities to English exposure outside the classroom are limited. The aim of this study was to examine professional characteristics that an effective EFL teacher should have as perceived by Taiwanese university students. A four-section questionnaire was used as a data collection instrument, and the study sample included responses from 68 senior students majoring in EFL. The results show that the three most significant characteristics of an effective teacher of English in the eyes of Taiwanese university students are not related specifically to the teacher's knowledge of the subject or English proficiency level. Those characteristics can be attributed to any teacher, and they include providing clear grading guidelines, giving clear explanations, and preparing each lesson well. The findings may contribute valid information on college students' expectations of EFL teachers in the Asian educational context and help make the language learning process more effective.

Keywords: *effective teachers of English, English-major students, professional qualities*

1. Introduction

Background

As the government of Taiwan puts an emphasis on fostering the English language education at all levels in order to develop the country's ties with the world community

in various spheres and even attempting to develop the country into a bilingual nation by year 2030, the role of teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) becomes one of the keys to success.

Recently, quite a number of attempts have been made at all levels of EFL education to make the language-learning process more effective by turning from traditionally formal, teacher-centered classrooms to less formal practices that would be more oriented to learners' needs, interests, expectations, and beliefs. Educational psychology and linguistic psychology researchers agree with the assertion that learners' beliefs are one of the most significant components impacting on students' learning behavior and learning interest (Pintrich & DeGroot, 1990; Kartchava & Ammar, 2014; Kamiya, 2018 etc.). So, it goes without saying that teachers who try to do their best to create an effective classroom environment should take their students' beliefs into consideration, at least to a certain degree.

The role of EFL teachers themselves becomes crucial when it comes to the Asian and, particularly, Taiwanese educational context. In a situation when English is learned in a non-English-speaking environment, when the contrast between the native language and culture and the target language and culture is so noticeable, and opportunities for learners to be exposed to English outside their classroom are limited, an EFL teacher often becomes the only connecting link between students and the target language they study. Under these circumstances, the learners' success may depend on their teacher's instructional methods, knowledge of the subject, and personal characteristics even more than in other situations. So, it seems reasonable for a teacher to be aware of how students perceive his or her teaching performance. Definitely, this does not mean instructors should try to please the class by fulfilling every possible wish of their students. But, some information may be taken into consideration and used for pinpointing problem zones in the teaching and learning process. Disregarding students' expectations of language classes can lead the students to loss of confidence and limitation of ultimate achievement (Horwitz, 1987).

Purpose of the Study

The motivation for this work is the current educational policies of the Taiwanese government promoting learning English not only as a means of intercultural communication but also as a means of strengthening the country's position among the members of the world community. There is a need to help EFL instructors, especially prospective teachers, overcome obstacles they may encounter while teaching, such as learners' low motivation or lack of achievement, and create more positive and productive environment in the classroom.

The purpose of this study was to find out professional qualities that are considered the

most important for an effective EFL teacher by Taiwanese university students majoring in EFL.

Research Question

There was one research question considered:

What professional qualities should an effective English Language teacher possess from the view point of Taiwanese university students majoring in EFL?

The predicted answer was “The most important professional qualities of an EFL teacher are high level of proficiency in English and using a variety of EFL teaching methods”.

2. Literature Review

The subject of language teaching effectiveness is not new. Strategies for effective language teaching were in the focus of attention of many researches within the last few decades. In almost earlier works, conclusions were made from the perspective of educators themselves, and only in the middle of the 1980s the attention of the authors was turned to language learners' perspectives. That approach was pioneered by Elaine Horwitz who described views on foreign language learning pointing out the importance of taking students' expectations into consideration while defining effective instructional strategies for teaching ESL (Horwitz, 1987). Horwitz introduced an instrument to study both university students' and teachers' views on learning one of the commonly taught foreign languages (English, French, German, or Spanish) that was called the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI). Later on, Horwitz' BALLI model or a modified version of it was applied for studies on other languages as well. For example, Tumposky (1991) analyzed beliefs of Russian language learners, and the subjects of Mori (1999) research were students of Japanese. The overall results have demonstrated “that beliefs about language learning are context-specific and learners from different cultures may have different attitudes, approaches to and opinions about learning a new language” (Nikitina and Furuoka, 2006). Moreover, times change, and students' beliefs may change with the times.

In a number of recent studies devoted to students' beliefs about language learning the focus of attention was narrowed down to the personality of a teacher. Studies, though not numerous, investigating effectiveness of, particularly, EFL teachers from the perspective of learners came from different parts of the world, but relatively few of them had reference to the Asian educational context.

Barnes and Lock (2010) analyzed Korean female university students' beliefs about the attributes of effective EFL teachers. The study findings were put together under such categories as rapport, delivery, fairness, knowledge and credibility, and organization

and preparation, as it was done earlier by Faranda and Clarke (2004) in their research on marketing students' observations of outstanding teaching. It was found that, according to Korean students' perceptions, the most important characteristics of effective EFL teachers belonged to all five categories, though rapport and delivery predominated.

Whichadee and Orawiwatnakul (2012) compared low and high proficiency students' opinions about effective EFL teachers from Bangkok University. Their observation covered four areas: English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, organization and communication skills and socio-affective skills. As a result, both groups of student respondents ranked characteristics of effective language teachers in the following order from the most important to the least important, respectively: organization and communication skills, socio-affective skills, pedagogical knowledge, and English proficiency.

In a study of Indonesian students majoring in teaching English as a foreign language at an English education department, respondents mentioned that an effective EFL teacher should possess qualities belonging to all groups of characteristics: language knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, socio-affective skills, and teacher-student relationship. In the view of Indonesian prospective EFL teachers, effective language teachers should “master the subject matter well, know how to deliver it well, and be good figures for students” (Sundari, 2016).

Thus, surveys analyzing qualities of an effective English language teacher share one common fact that those qualities belong to all parts of the language-teaching process: socio-affective skills, pedagogical knowledge, language knowledge, and the teacher's personal qualities. As Hoque (2009) pointed out, “many different studies' views about what constitutes an effective language teacher mostly matched each other even though the degree of their agreement on the common characteristics is a bit different. Finally, the concept of an effective English language teacher consists of a balanced combination of above four main aspects”.

Only three earlier studies of the qualities of EFL instruction and EFL teachers in the educational background of Taiwan, belonging to the two recent decades, have been found though none of them is directly related to the issue of EFL teacher effectiveness from the perspective of university or college students. Chen & Lin (2009) discussed characteristics of effective EFL teachers as seen by Taiwanese senior high school students. Bi's (2012) conference presentation “Evaluation of Teaching Effectiveness in Taiwan's EFL Context” was mainly focused on the evaluation methodology of EFL teaching effectiveness. Tsou (2013) made a comparison of native and non-native English-speaking teachers of English as viewed by Taiwanese university students. There have been hardly any studies analyzing problems related to characteristics of

effective EFL teachers based on the views of university students studying English as their major subject in the Taiwanese educational context. However, knowledge of students' beliefs might provide English instructors, especially those who are foreigners, with a clue as to how to organize and adjust classroom practices in order to constructively respond to students' needs and expectations.

3. Method

The current study represents an observation research targeted at obtaining data coming from the population of Taiwanese English-major undergraduates. The research approach used in the study is a qualitative descriptive method. The data were collected through a structured questionnaire generating the subjects' responses towards their views on the professional qualities of an effective English language teacher. In order to answer the research question, percentages for the survey items within each domain were calculated. While processing other data referring to the subject of this study, the ranking of the responses was used as well.

Participants

The study findings presented in this paper are based on the data coming from a sample of sixty-eight survey responses. A questionnaire was administered to a group of sixty-eight students enrolled at a Department of Applied English in a private university in southern Taiwan. All participants were fourth-year students majoring in English as a Foreign Language. All the respondents in this study had a solid and extensive prior English learning experience. So, they might already have certain beliefs about English learning in general and EFL teachers in particular.

Questionnaire and Procedure

The instrument used for this observation survey was a self-report structured questionnaire developed from a list of attributes of effective teachers and lecturers made by Barnes and Lock (2010). The original list presented five categories based on Faranda and Clarke' research of students' observations of outstanding teaching (2004): Rapport, Delivery, Fairness, Knowledge and Credibility, and Organization and Preparation. The statements used in the questionnaire employed in this study are a modified and simplified version of the original list of attributes. The Rapport was not included in the present study as the purpose was to receive responses about professional qualities of teachers, not the teacher-student relations. Moreover, it was taken for granted that establishing harmonious relationship with students is a primary concern of any teacher, no matter what subject they teach. The wording of the original source was simplified to make statements easy to understand for students as the questionnaire was given to them

in English only. Besides, if of the two overlapping attributes one was related to all teachers in general and the other was related specifically to English language teachers, the first was eliminated.

The questionnaire had 30 questions and was divided into four sections: Delivery, Fairness, Knowledge and Credibility, and Organization and Preparation. It included only one dependent variable that presented students' responses to the items. A simple dichotomous response format "Agree/Disagree" was suggested with the purpose of making a clear distinction between qualities that respondents consider important and qualities that they consider unimportant.

Students answered the questions anonymously. They were given as much time as they needed for answering the questions during one of their English classes and could use dictionaries in case they needed to look up the meaning of some words that they didn't know.

Besides, there was an informal follow-up interview with a few student-respondents that was targeted at finding out some additional information and their opinions with regard to certain trends that became obvious after the data were processed.

4. Results and Discussion

The data received during the analysis of 68 survey responses are presented in the four tables in accordance with the four categories of characteristics.

TABLE 1. Delivery (personal style, communication, methodology, content)

Ord.	Statement	Percentage of agreeing (%)
	Effective English language teachers ...	
1	give clear explanations	85.3
2	are enthusiastic	79.4
3	encourage group work and participation	67.6
4	correct errors	67.6
5	explain grammar rules	67.6
6	provide pronunciation practice	61.8
7	provide interesting and meaningful activities	55.9
8	adjust content to the students' English levels	55.9
9	use various teaching methods	47
10	prepare students for examinations	44.1
11	explain vocabulary	41.2
12	use students' native language when giving explanations	17.6

With regard to instructional delivery, as shown in table 1, the most frequently mentioned qualities students attribute to effective EFL teachers (selected by more than two thirds of all respondents) are:

1. Giving clear explanations (selected by 58 respondents)
2. Being enthusiastic (54 respondents)
3. Encouraging group work and participation (46 respondents)
4. Correcting errors (46 respondents)
5. Explaining grammar rules (46 respondents)

The importance of giving clear explanations is obvious, especially in a situation when an EFL teacher cannot make use of the students' native language during instruction. Lecturers should keep it in mind that English is a foreign language to students, and most of them have the opportunity to be exposed to it only in their English class. Besides, many Asian students may not feel at ease to ask for further explanation or clarification even though they do not quite understand what the teacher says. The best solution is to use simple language without long, difficult words or idioms and slow down while giving explanations.

A large number of respondents (79.4%) would like to have EFL teachers that are enthusiastic while teaching their classes. It goes without saying that a teacher's enthusiasm has a powerful impact on students; it increases students' motivation, helps in maintaining interest and leads students to improvement and success.

The first two delivery characteristics that seem most important features of EFL teachers to Taiwanese students were also most frequently selected by Korean students in the study made by Barnes and Lock (2010).

The following three of the top five qualities are mentioned by 46 students each. These respondents believe that a good EFL teacher encourages group work and student participation in class rather than just does lecturing. So, Taiwanese students might be changing their views on language teaching styles because EFL teachers are changing their instructional methods. Besides, students majoring in English may realize that lecturing is not the most effective method for teaching English communicative skills. The same tendency was observed by Barnes and Lock discussing perceptions of Korean students and mentioning that they "are now more receptive to a participatory style than they used to be" (Barnes and Lock, 2010). As for error correction, most Taiwanese students feel they would like to have their errors corrected by teachers. They also expect instructors to give explanation of grammar rules during the study process, which means grammar is viewed rather a constituent of any English course than a separate course or subject to study.

More than a half of respondents also believe that competent EFL teachers should practice pronunciation during a class, organize interesting and meaningful activities, and adjust content to the students' English levels.

Interestingly, the statement about using students’ native language when giving explanations was selected least of all, only by 12 respondents out of 68. It may be partially explained by the fact that all subjects in this particular study have been taught by a teacher who has no competence in the students’ native language, so these students may be better adjusted to all-English instruction in class. Moreover, they all major in English, and, consequently, their English-learning experience may be more solid compared to other groups of EFL learners.

The second section of the questionnaire includes statements associated with fairness.

TABLE 2. Fairness (impartiality, examination, preparation, grading, transparency, workload)

Ord.	Statement	Percentage of agreeing (%)
	Effective English language teachers ...	
1	give clear grading guidelines	88.2
2	make examinations which allow students to express their knowledge freely	73.5
3	treat all students equally	67.6
4	give a balanced workload	50
5	give timely assignment feedback	44.1
6	give examinations that are closely related to material studied in class	41.2
7	provide reviews before and after an examination	35.3
8	clearly explain attendance and late assignment submission policies	32.4

In the category “Fairness” the most desirable qualities of effective EFL teachers that students indicate are:

1. Giving clear grading guidelines (selected by 60 respondents out of 68)
2. Making examinations which allow students to express their knowledge freely (50 respondents)
3. Treat all students equally (46)

The statement about providing clear grading guidelines is the most frequently selected option in the survey. This fact may indicate one of the greatest concerns of students. While life in the modern society is getting more and more competitive and achievement-oriented, students care about their grades more than ever. That is why they would like to know teachers’ assessment criteria in detail. Besides, some students mentioned later, when the issue of the EFL teacher professionalism was discussed in their English Conversation class, grades and grading were so important because they gave a chance to win a scholarship. So, winning a scholarship seems to be a key motivation factor for the pragmatic students of the modern generation. Also, respondents believe that effective EFL teachers use examination format giving them

more freedom in expressing their knowledge. A few of them mentioned in their informal follow-up oral commentaries that they would like EFL teachers to use other exam formats as alternatives to formal written tests. That fact might signal a certain exhaustion. As Taiwanese educational culture is immensely test-oriented, many students look upon a test as a very matter-of-fact event and may even form a kind of apathy to test results. The impartial treatment of all students in class is also mentioned as one of the major characteristics of effective EFL teachers. Taiwanese university students are concerned about how unbiased teachers are and whether all learners are given equal opportunities and attention while studying English.

In Barnes and Lock’s (2010) study of Korean students, the impartial treatment was ranked as number one, and the clear grading guidelines were number three. Thus, with reference to fairness, both Taiwanese and Korean students’ perceptions display similar trends.

Table 3 displays students’ perceptions regarding EFL teachers’ language skills and language study aspects.

TABLE 3. Knowledge and Credibility

Ord.	Statement	Percentage of agreeing (%)
	Effective English language teachers ...	
1	are proficient in English	76.5
2	are able to answer complex questions	64.7
3	have good knowledge of grammar	64.7
4	are able to teach study techniques	52.9
5	go beyond the textbook	29.4

The most important characteristic pointed out in this category is EFL teachers’ proficiency level. It is obvious that EFL student-majors look on their English teacher as an example to follow. In a way, they are more demanding than other students as they rely on their teacher’s pronunciation, knowledge of vocabulary and language structures as a model. The second and third options, selected by 44 students each, are closely connected with the first and supplement the concept of English proficiency.

Again, this finding shows a common trend between Taiwanese and Korean university students. The Korean students esteem EFL lecturers who are well qualified for EFL lecturing, have good knowledge of grammar and vocabulary (Barnes and Lock, 2010).

The last table presents results for the category of organization and preparation.

TABLE 4. Organization and Preparation

Ord.	Statement	Percentage of agreeing (%)
	Effective English language teachers ...	
1	prepare each lesson well	85.3
2	give clear course objectives	76.5

3	set out all materials needed for assignments	55.9
4	provide original supplemental material	52.9
5	stick to the syllabus	14.7

The highest-ranking teacher effectiveness criterion in this category is preparation for a class, chosen by 58 students. Hardworking and diligent people are highly respected in Asian, and particularly Taiwanese, culture. The ability to work hard is one of the key components of professionalism and success. No wonder, if students see a teacher who is perfectly prepared for a class, not only do they admire that teacher, but they are also more motivated, inspired and ready to work hard themselves. The second most important quality within this category is clear course objectives (52 respondents), i.e. knowing not only what students have to study, but also why they need to study that. The Korean students in Barnes and Lock's (2010) study also placed these two at the top of most important characteristics in the category "Organization and Preparation".

The option "sticking to the syllabus", selected by just 10 students, in this category has the lowest rating of all survey statements. Taiwanese students seem not to care much about how accurately a lecturer follows the official course syllabus and do not include this characteristic into the most important qualities of an effective English Teacher.

5. Concluding Remarks

The purpose of this study is identifying the most important characteristics of an effective EFL teacher based on perceptions of Taiwanese university students studying English as their major. The survey questions cover four categories of EFL teaching, namely delivery, fairness, knowledge and credibility, and organization and preparation. The list of eleven most important qualities that effective EFL teachers should possess (selected by more than two third parts of all respondents) is as follows.

Effective English Language teachers ...

1. give clear grading guidelines
2. give clear explanations
3. prepare each lesson well
4. are enthusiastic
5. are proficient in English
6. give clear course objectives

make examinations which allow students to express their knowledge freely

7. encourage group work and participation
8. correct errors

9. explain grammar rules
10. treat all students equally

Thus, the predicted answer to the research question was not proved. A number of conclusions can be drawn from the study findings.

First of all, the top three qualities selected by more than 85 percent of responders do not belong to the domain of English proficiency which might seem unexpected to some degree. The top three qualities of an effective EFL teacher as perceived by Taiwanese students, in fact, may be attributed to a teacher of any subject. So, those EFL lectures, both local and foreign, teaching university students in Taiwan should take it into consideration that most of their students would like to have detailed directions with regard to how their class work is graded. They also view a teacher as the main person who can help in case any difficulties related to studies arise and expect explanations given in a simple and easy-to-understand language.

Secondly, teachers' enthusiasm and English proficiency level matter a lot to students. Thus, lack of enthusiasm is easily noticed and may directly affect learners' attitude and motivation. As for proficiency in English and other characteristics, except the last one, all of them are inseparable parts of an EFL lecturer's professionalism, and professionals have been greatly valued and respected at all times.

Finally, it must be pointed out that the present study definitely suffers from a number of limitations. First of all, the findings come from a group of senior university students at only one department of one university in Taiwan. To receive more conclusive evidence, an analysis involving a wider range of samples regarding other age groups of students and their major subjects throughout the country is required. In addition, a dichotomous response format may not reveal learners' judgments concerning EFL classroom practices accurately enough. Thus, to get a more precise picture of Taiwanese students' perceptions of effective EFL teachers' professional qualities more observations of actual EFL contexts are required.

The main conclusion that can be drawn is that, although an analysis of data coming from sixty-eight respondents cannot provide a comprehensive insight into the issue of EFL teaching effectiveness, it may give EFL teachers a stimulus for reflection on how to enhance their instructional practices in order to create an ideal classroom climate not only for students but also for themselves.

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