

## **What are the characteristics of a good teacher?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper presents the findings of a study conducted in 2011 with the students studying English at the School of Languages at Sabanci University (SU) and the participants (English teachers, academicians, and English teacher candidates) who attended our presentation “What are the characteristics of a good teacher?” presented at the 15<sup>th</sup> International INGED Conference, “Taking it to the Limits” held on 20 October, 2011 on their perceived characteristics of the exemplary teacher. The idea to conduct such a study came about upon observation of teachers’ unease about the evaluation forms that students complete at the end of each semester. Teachers’ perceptions of effective teaching seemed to differ from those of students. Therefore, we decided to prepare various instruments to identify and measure students’ perceptions of the characteristics of exemplary language teachers and teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics of the exemplary language teacher and compare the results. In light of this aim, 31 intermediate 1 and 2 level students were asked to provide a written response to the prompt “Describe your perception of the good English teacher” to explore the characteristics they find exemplary in their (past and present) language teachers’ teaching practices. The participants attending our session at the INGED conference were also presented the same prompt at the beginning of our presentation and asked for a written response. The participants kept their responses until the end of the presentation in case they wanted to make any changes or additions. We hope that the findings in this paper encourage teachers to ‘re-contemplate’ their own teaching methodology and its impacts on students’ learning processes, and, if necessary, make changes to their teaching to promote students’ language competence and performance.

### **Introduction**

Student 1: What did you get on your midterm?

Student 2: 80.

Student 1: Wow! How did you get so high?

Student 2: Our [English] teacher is really good.

The above is a dialogue that we heard between two students studying English at the School of Languages (SL) at Sabancı University. One might have expected student 1 to ask the follow up question: “Why is your teacher so good?” or “What does your teacher do?” As no such question came, the students made no mention of their perception of the good teacher (except for the inference that we can make which is “A good teacher helps the student to get good marks”!). Nevertheless, this quick exchange highlighted the fact that at least one of the students had some thoughts about why their teacher was good. With this in mind, and with particular reference to the lack of elaboration on the part of the student in question, we decided to conduct research into what Turkish

learners regard as good teaching of English. The decision to also add teachers' conception of the good English teacher came about at seeing teachers' unease about the evaluation forms that students anonymously complete at the end of each semester. A fair share of SL teachers of English commented that students' perception of the good teacher did not really match the qualities that a good teacher actually has. Hence, this study aims to explore both students and English teachers' conception of the traits and behavior of the *good* teacher hoping that this will encourage teachers to 're-contemplate' their own teaching methodology and its impacts on students' learning processes, and, if necessary, make changes to their teaching to promote students' language competence and performance.

### **Literature review**

There are several instances of attempts to qualify what constitutes excellence in teaching in the literature. Jacobs (1996) conducted extensive research across the North American continent, drawing from personal correspondence and interviews with a large number of educators to make her findings. While her work was neither explicitly focused on the teaching of English nor did it take into account the views of learners, it does offer an interesting framework for reference. Jacobs categorized the traits of a good teacher according to four themes; *feedback*; *expectations*; *attitude*; and *skills*.

A good teacher's *attitude* might typically mean that they; love teaching; exhibit goodwill; are receptive; are supportive listeners; are patient; are self-analytical; motivate with enthusiasm; are honest and reliable; are discreet; and have a sense of humor. In terms of *skills*, a good teacher; communicates well; is knowledgeable; teaches relevant information; teaches study and test-taking skills; is well organized; accommodates individual needs; and establishes and maintains discipline. As far as *expectations* are concerned, good teachers; set out clear and reasonable goals; and set various and appropriate levels of challenge. For *feedback* a good teacher; prepares appropriate tests and quizzes; is a just grader; gives constructive feedback; encourages self-esteem; ensures positive interaction; and guarantees a non-threatening classroom.

Other studies focusing on conceptions of the *good teacher* can be found in the literature. Findings indicate that conceptions focus on both the professional and personal characteristics of the teacher. For instance, Goldhaber (2002) in his meta-analysis of the characteristics of teachers that affect student achievement states that effective teachers have been reported to have professional qualities such as a teacher's degree and experience in teaching their subject, their subject knowledge and pedagogic knowledge. Similarly, Kottler and Zehm (2000) also highlight that sound subject knowledge and proper methods of instruction are important professional qualities effective teachers have. However, unlike a majority of the literature, they also emphasize the importance of the more 'human' qualities such as charisma, compassion, egalitarianism, sense of humour, creativity and honesty.

As mentioned beforehand, although several studies do examine the characteristics of the exemplary teacher, they tend to be based more in Western than in non-Western contexts and have generally been conducted at primary and secondary levels (Flowerdew, Levis, Zhang, & Watkins, 2007). For example, the management consulting company Hay McBer (2000) was commissioned by the Department of Education in the United Kingdom to draw up a model of teacher effectiveness. Hence, after utilizing observations, in-depth interviews, questionnaires, focus groups discussions with various stakeholders, they identified three complementary but distinctive attributes of teacher effectiveness: Teaching skills, Professional characteristics and classroom climate.

Moreover, many of these studies discuss the traits of the good teacher at a general level without really taking into consideration the subtle but important differences of teacher traits from discipline to discipline (Flowerdew, Levis, Zhang, & Watkins, 2007). However, the few studies conducted with foreign language teachers has indicated that the qualities that these teachers need to be effective are specific and varied when compared to teaching in general. For instance, research on language teachers so far has indicated that skills such as creating a good foreign language environment and creating activities so that students practice and use the foreign language are just a couple of the behaviors expected from *good* foreign language teachers (Riddell, 2001). Flowerdew Levis, Zhang and Watkin's (2007) study, is one other study that specifically looked at the qualities that make a tertiary *EFL* teacher good in the *People's Republic of China* (PRC). To obtain a more comprehensive view of the qualities of the good *EFL* teacher, they have consulted three important parties: Chinese students, Chinese teachers and Western teachers. Analysis of their data indicated that these three stakeholders believe that good teachers typically exhibit the following traits:

1. Are highly disciplined
2. Have team spirit and cope with diversity
3. Display high standards of behaviour and responsibility
4. Have sound pedagogical content knowledge
5. Are practical in teaching
6. Focus on students' overall development

All of the above views indicate that people's conception of the *good* teacher can vary depending on where the study is done (e.g., Canada, China), whose views are consulted (e.g., students, teachers) and the subject area of the teachers being assessed (e.g., Language teachers). Hence, this study hopes to contribute to the literature by investigating both Turkish students and foreign language teachers' conception of the qualities of the effective foreign language teacher.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The learner participants were 31 Sabancı University SL students (Intermediate 1 & 2 Levels) located in Istanbul, Turkey. To be more specific, 16 of these students were from an intermediate 1 level class and the remaining 15 were intermediate 2 students. At SL, though both intermediate 1 and 2 students are exposed to the same curriculum, intermediate 1 students are offered 24 hours of teaching, whereas the intermediate 2 students take 20 hours of classes. The aim is to give the intermediate 1 students more time to process what has been taught in class and to provide them with the extra support that they need. Intermediate 1 students are more or less at the B1 Common European Framework level whereas intermediate 2 students are at the B2 level. The English language teachers participating in the study on the other hand were actually composed of the participants who attended our presentation at the 15<sup>th</sup> international conference titled "Taking it to the Limits". Our presentation was scheduled on 20<sup>th</sup> October, 2011.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

The students were asked to write a response to the prompt: *What is your perception of the good English Teacher?* 16 students (Intermediate 1) wrote their responses in Turkish, 15 in English. The Turkish responses were first translated into English and then each set of data was coded separately by each of the writers. The writers then compared their codes and negotiated the codes that did not match until a consensus was reached. Coding of the data led to the identification of seven categories; 1) *what should be taught*; 2) *methods of delivery*; 3) *teacher qualities*; 4) *learning and retention*; 5) *tools*; 6) *classroom environment*; and 7) *allocation of homework*.

The same question was posed to the 30 participants during the conference presentation, making the sample size approximately equal to that of the student respondent group. These responses were given by the participants at the start of the presentation, before they had seen the student generated data. Participants were not aware at the time that we would ask them to share their comments for this study. The responses were collected at the end of the presentation, as the audience was asked to reflect on what they had written and how it compared to the student responses while the presentation was ongoing. At the end of the presentation, we told the audience that we would like to use their responses with their permission for the study and all participants presented us with their written responses and emails, so that the results could also be sent to them. The responses have been grouped according to themes that were identified among the student responses.

## **Results**

### **Learner results**

Coding of the learner data led to the identification of seven categories; 1) *what should be taught*; 2) *methods of delivery*; 3) *teacher qualities*; 4) *learning and retention*; 5) *tools*; 6) *classroom environment*; and 7) *allocation of homework*. Below, comments taken from the students responses representing each category can be seen. A number (e.g., 1, 2) represents that the response has come from an intermediate 1 student. Hence, the responses are translations of the student responses. Intermediate 2 students are represented with capital letter numbers (e.g., A, B). These students were asked to write their responses in English and no (grammatical) changes have been made to the sentences

### ***What should be taught?***

For this category, it was surprising to see that only the intermediate 1 students made comments on what they believed should be taught. Students especially focused on the need to speak, in addition to the learning of syntax.

- For a strong command of English or any other foreign language, only working on grammar and writing is insufficient. The teacher needs to also focus on speaking and encouraging the student to speak, and to ensure that the student is relaxed while doing so. (1)
- I think that vocabulary is more important than grammar to speak a language. (2)
- Although being equipped with grammar and vocabulary is important, that language is a mirror of culture needs to be reflected. (4)
- Rather than working with worksheets, it is important for us to understand and speak English. (8)

### ***Methods of delivery***

Both group of students made comments on how they believed teaching should ideally take place in the foreign language classroom. Nevertheless, the intermediate 1 students made more comments than intermediate 2. The comments they have made have been categorized further to clearly see how they believed a foreign language needs to be taught.

#### **SPEAKING**

- English teacher must speak English all the time. (B)
- The teacher should encourage students to speak more in the class (3)
- The teacher should get students to speak and should ask questions. When they do this, then we'll be able to practice the language and we wouldn't get bored. (6)

#### **FUN**

- The teacher should teach in a funny way, not like studying math. (B)
- The teacher needs to be enjoyable; if I can enjoy the lesson I can learn easily. (C)
- They can organize a game to make the lesson more exciting. (G)

- The teacher can make their students play games or let them make presentations. (J)
- Playing games between lessons can make lessons more enjoyable (12)

#### READING

- The teacher should force us to read in English. (K)

#### VOCABULARY

- Vocabulary should not be taught in isolation. The teacher should provide as many example sentences as possible of various vocabulary families and word formations. (13)
- For example, when a word is taught, the teacher should also use it in a sentence or give an example from real life (10)
- The vocabulary we are taught should be used in sentences so that retention of the vocab. is more permanent.(7)

#### INTEGRATION OF SKILLS

- Separate exercises for listening, writing, reading and speaking is necessary. All skills should be addressed and the teacher needs to ensure that the students have rich cultural experiences.

#### GROUP WORK

- Working in groups and teams can also promote good learning opportunities. (7)

#### TIMING

- The teacher should teach the lesson in a fluent and organized manner. For example, leaving a listening to the last lesson is not beneficial at all. (7)

As can be seen, in addition to indicating how they believe the good teacher teaches various skills, they have also stated their conceptions on the various methods teacher can use to make learning more effective such as the importance of forming groups.

#### ***Teacher qualities***

As with many other studies on perceptions of the *good* teacher, there were many comments focusing on the personal and professional qualities of the effective language teacher. As can be seen, most comments were related to teachers' personal attributes and most of these were made by the intermediate 2 students, the students with a higher command of English.

#### PERSONAL QUALITIES

- The teacher must be enjoyable... to learn different things. (A)
- The teacher must do this job for teach[ing] not for money. (A)
- They must love their job; a student can understand this easily. (E)

- The teacher must be creative. (E)
- They must be helpful to their students. (E)
- The good English teacher must be full of energy; we must feel it. (F)
- A teacher must be helpful for their students. (G)
- They should be energetic during the lessons and try to explain the topic in an interesting way. (G)
- I think a good teacher should be likeable and empathetic/understanding. (3)
- An English teacher should be compassionate, and understanding.
- I want them [my English teacher] to smile and to always be happy. (14)
- The first characteristic of a good English teacher must be honesty. (H)
- The teacher should be fair. (H)
- The teacher has to be understanding for all the students. (I)
- A good English teacher... [teaches] for the benefit of their students. (L)
- One needs a guide to learn a language competently (4).
- Teachers should understand that what is important is learning and not grades. They shouldn't pressurize students by scaring them with grades. (14)

#### PROFESSIONAL QUALITIES

- The teacher must have a good academic career. (A)
- A good English teacher... works as hard as their students [and] tries to make life easier for their students. (J)
- Though there will be limits/borders, teachers should be sincere enough for students to openly talk to their teacher about problems. (10)
- A good English teacher's characteristics will vary according to the institution they are working at....If a student needs more practice in speaking, then a good teacher will get the students to talk. (12)

#### THE CULTURAL DILEMMA

Students in addition to indicating their views about the personal and professional traits of the teacher also portrayed views about the importance of having knowledge about the 'culture' of the language being taught and indicated their preference for the teacher to speak without a Turkish accent. The preference for a native-like accent came solely from the intermediate 1 students.

- Only an English [person] can teach us English culture. (A)
- An English teacher's accent is very important. It is important that we can understand his/her accent and an English teacher should know Turkish because our English is not perfect and we should be able to ask questions in Turkish if necessary (6)
- For example, additions such as talking with an accent and fluently, .... will make learning easier for the students (4)

- A good English teacher should be able to get students' attention with their speech and accent. (12)
- I want them[my English teacher] to have come from or to have lived overseas and to have a British or American accent. (14)

### ***Learning and retention***

The students also made comments on what the *good* teacher does so that learning is effective and retention results. Once again, it is the intermediate 1 students who made more comments on this category.

- A good English teacher makes the lessons easier for the students. (1)
- A good English teacher should always be able to gain our full attention. Keeping on focus is difficult when you are dealing with a language you don't know
- I believe that a system in which the students talk more than the teacher is more beneficial. (13)
- I think the most important duty of a foreign language teacher is to teach students vocabulary in such a way that it is never forgotten. (2)
- Ensuring that the student is relaxed is especially important (1)
- Especially, if these games focus on vocabulary, it will make it more fun to learn vocabulary and remember the words. (12)
- If lessons are made to be more enjoyable, the pace of learning will also be faster. (12)

### ***Tools***

No intermediate 2 students made any mention of which tools the *good* teacher uses.

- For example, additions such as ... multi-media assisted lessons, etc. will make learning easier for the students (4)
- It is essential for a language teacher to use visuals and to explain things clearly. (10)

### ***The classroom environment***

In this category, students made several comments on how they believed the effective language teachers manage the classroom dynamics and the kind of classroom atmosphere the teacher contributes to. Both intermediate 1 and 2 students made comments.

### **CLASSROOM MANAGEMENT**

- The teacher needs to protect the balance between silence and noise.(C)
- A good teacher should [lead] all the lessons and try to make students enjoy the subjects. (D)
- The teacher mustn't lose control; they may share control but not all of it. (I)

- The teacher should also have enough control/discipline over the classroom to ensure that the students' do not lose interest during class. (5)
- The teacher should not do challenging activities in the last hours of class. (16)
- The teacher needs to let the students take their breaks on time (16)

#### CLASSROOM ATMOSPHERE

- The teacher should work [to] make the lesson enjoyable. (L)
- The impression the teacher leaves on the student holds great importance in how the class will proceed. (5)

#### ***Allocation of homework***

Another category that did not come up in the literature was the allocation of homework. As can be seen from below, the intermediate 1 students' comments indicate the students' needs for the teacher to check homework regularly whereas the intermediate 2 students focus on the amount of homework they believe the good teacher assigns.

- A good teacher should give homework to make the students practice. (D)
- A good English teacher gives lots of homework. (K)
- ...and should check assigned homework the next day so that students can learn from their mistakes. (3)
- Homework controls should follow a regular routine. (3)

#### **Teacher results**

In terms of *what should be taught*, none of the teacher respondents identified specific areas which teachers have to work on in class. No responses included any mention of grammar, vocabulary, nor any of the four skills of reading, speaking, writing and listening.

The second theme, *methods of delivery*, also appeared to be less of an issue among teachers. One response suggested that teachers '*use different strategies*' in class. While several responses focused on the notion of the teacher making delivery fun, they did so in a way that regarded this as being a teacher quality rather than being a method of delivery, and so are included under the *teacher qualities* theme.

As with the student-generated data, *teacher qualities* appeared to be the most frequently occurring theme. Of the 61 comments left on the response sheets, 46 were related to the qualities that a good teacher displays. Another similarity between the student and teacher responses was that teacher qualities could be separated into *personal qualities*, *professional qualities* and the *cultural aspect*.

In terms of personal qualities, the adjectives *'friendly'* (4 occurrences), *'understanding'* (3 occurrences), *'tolerant and patient'* (3 occurrences) and *'helpful'* (3 occurrences) were the most frequently mentioned. Several comments focused on the necessity for the teacher to be an assuring figure: the teacher should *'have self-confidence'*, *'love teaching'*, *'be like a therapist when necessary'*, *'not give up easily when faced with a challenge'*, *'give the students the courage to do their best'*, *'be motivating and hard-working'* and *'be reflective and open to change.'* Other comments raised the notion of the teaching having empathy towards the learners: the teacher should *'have a sense of empathy'*, *'be kind and approachable'*, *'treat all students fairly'*, *'be attentive to student's needs, anxieties'*, *'be tolerant, sensible and empathetic'*, *'know what motivates students'* and *'have patience, tolerance and a sense of humour.'* Another group of responses focused, as mentioned previously, on the positivity of the teacher: a teacher should *'be joyful and smile often'*, *'be humorous / have a sense of humour'*, *'be entertaining'*, *'be fun and motivating.'*

In terms of professional qualities, the notion of the teaching being knowledgeable in the field (3 occurrences) was the most mentioned idea. In addition to having knowledge in the field of ELT, certain responses suggested that the teacher should extend their professional knowledge on a continual basis: the teacher should *'have insight into a range of different academic disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, etc.'*, *'be a researcher and a facilitator'*, *'be a good learner and a life-long learner'*, *'have relevant qualifications'* and *'care about professional development.'* Furthermore, there were suggestions regarding doing the job in an appropriate manner on a day-to-day basis: the teacher should *'be aware of responsibilities'*, *'be well-organized'*, *'be well-prepared'* and *'be professional in their work.'*

There were three comments on the theme of cultural awareness: The teacher should *'be familiar with the learning culture of the students in a particular setting'*, *'be familiar with the language of the learners'* and *'take into account linguistic imperialism, with regard to English as the lingua franca.'* It should be noted that all of these came from one respondent.

Another similarity to the student data was in fact that there were responses which focused on *learning and retention*. Only one specific technique was mentioned: the teacher *'shouldn't correct mistakes repeatedly.'* Several responses discussed general factors relating to this theme: the teacher should *'be aware of what the students are lacking'*, *'observe, direct and assess the classroom'*, *'adapt to the specific needs of a particular group of learners'* and *'have good interaction with students.'*

As with the themes *what should be taught* and *methods of delivery*, there was a marked difference between the responses of teachers and students in terms of teacher *tools*. The only response that made any reference to this was one that expressed the notion that teachers should *'keep up with new trends in the ELT world.'*

In terms of the *classroom environment*, several ideas were mentioned. Firstly, respondents indicated the importance of the teacher maintaining control, echoing the importance of *classroom management* mentioned in the student responses: the teacher should '*not be strict without reason*' yet should still '*control the class effectively.*' Other responses, as with the student data, focused on the need for the teacher to foster a positive *classroom atmosphere*: the teacher should '*facilitate learning*', '*draw the attention of students with games and activities*', '*combine entertainment and learning*' and '*take into consideration the effect of the affective filter.*'

The theme of homework was another which was not prioritized by the teacher respondents. None of the responses mentioned the word, with only one hinting at the idea of the teacher getting the student to work independently outside the classroom, stating that the teacher should '*promote autonomous learning.*'

## **Discussion**

The coding of the qualitative data revealed many similarities with the frameworks already present in the literature. The current study uncovered issues which were also evident in previous studies; the importance of personal and professional teacher qualities, as highlighted by Hay McBer (2000); the importance given to effective learning and retention, as put forward by Flowerdew, Ellis, Zhang and Watkins (2007); and development of the classroom environment in terms of atmosphere and management, another focus of the framework given by Hay McBer (2000). These factors were apparent in the eyes of both the teachers and learners questioned for the current study.

One key difference, particularly from the model suggested by Jacobs (1996), was the importance placed on the cultural background of the teacher. Both teachers and learners in the current study mentioned the significance of the teacher's culture, which perhaps indicates that the characteristics valued in the language teacher vary slightly from a teacher in other subjects. The fact that Jacobs' research was not conducted with language teaching in mind, but rather teaching in general, supports this hypothesis.

In terms of similarities and differences between the responses of teachers and learners, the data from the current delivered some interesting findings. Teachers' responses could be classified into significantly fewer categories than those of the learners. While both teachers and learners placed value on *teacher qualities* and in terms of personal and professional characteristics, only one teacher talked about the cultural aspect. The notion of a teacher's cultural background therefore seems to be more important to the learner than the teacher. Regarding the *classroom environment*, both management and atmosphere appear to be as important for teachers as they are for learners. Additionally, both teachers and learners mentioned the idea of *learning and retention*, although neither really discussed the specifics of this trait.

According to the teacher responses, there were a number of traits which are apparently not considered to be a part of good teaching. Unlike the student responses, the notion of appropriate *methods of delivery* received only one tenuous mention in the teacher responses, with no focus on skills work whatsoever. Another interesting omission from the teacher responses was in the area of *what should be taught*. In contrast to the student data, no teachers mentioned this as being a sign of good teaching. Furthermore, there was great disparity in terms of the importance of *tools* and *homework*. There was only one, very general mention of tools in the teacher data, while *homework* was only mentioned in terms of developing learner autonomy.

The differences indicate that, while learners share some feelings with teachers about what constitutes good teaching, they also have divergent ideas. Indeed, the learner responses suggested that they have a sophisticated notion of what they want from a teacher. The areas they regard as being important, particularly in terms of appropriate allocation of homework and the importance of cultural knowledge, look set to challenge the teacher perception of what constitutes good teaching. Perhaps the teacher responses were based on what makes a teacher 'extra special' and that the overlooked categories could perhaps be viewed as the 'givens' of good teaching: *teaching methodology* and the *teaching of grammar and vocabulary* may fall into this area.

There were also interesting differences between the students at different language levels. Lower level language students seem to focus on the tools used and how they believe learning occurs more than the higher level students. Furthermore, the higher level students focused more on *how* they believed English should be taught whereas the lower-level students focused on *what* should be taught. One trait that both groups of learners did place a great deal of importance on was that of the personal qualities of the teacher. Indeed, as with the teacher respondents, this was the regarded as being the most important factor in good teaching.

In all, both similarities and differences can be found among both students' conception of the effective foreign language teacher among student proficiency levels and between teachers and students. Understanding these similarities and differences are important, so that teaching and learning of the target language can be facilitated. These findings hopefully will help teachers to understand the qualities of teachers that Turkish students find most effective at the tertiary level and will encourage teachers to make adjustments to their teaching as they see necessary.

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