The Teacher is a Person: Professional Qualifications and Personal Qualities

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Abstract

A major concern of applied linguistics and foreign language methodology is to highlight what makes “the good language teacher”. Lengthy lists of qualities may be proposed to teachers with the aim of drawing their attention on what they should search for. The assumption behind this paper is that no matter how academically equipped a teacher may be, he can fail in his mission if he does not show some human qualities necessary for sharing the learning/teaching experience. Thus, this work looks at the human dimension of the teacher as a highly influential factor in the outcome of a classroom experience. In order to better comprehend what is at stake two (02) groups of students (92 BA, and 44 Master) of the English department, Djilali Liabès University in Algeria have been questioned. Most students (64% BA & 70% Master) expressed their preferences for teachers who have a warm and nice personality over competent, but distant teachers. Two personality assets proved to be particularly desired namely generosity and empathy.

Keywords: Efficient teacher, teacher personality, human characteristics, empathy, generosity
Introduction

The present paper starts from the noticeable fact that behind any profession there is a person. Teaching is a job which is practiced by millions of women and men all over the world, yet the extent to which each individual teacher responds to the educational institutions, learners and sometimes their families’ expectations; depends on both professional and personality variables.

No matter what the classroom situation is, there are certain qualifications and qualities that most efficient teachers seem to have. We all remember those special teachers we have had while young pupils or students. It is such persons we often wish to resemble later; it is also them who have inspired many of us to become teachers on our turn. But we also remember those teachers we nearly hated, and with them the subject matter they taught, either because of their lack of professionalism, or mostly because of their unfriendly nature. Thus, personality traits may also influence learners’ conception of the “good teacher”. Shelley, V. highlights some “behaviors” that the good teacher should have and reminds him/her “…you’ll be letting them see that you are, after all, human-and one who takes a genuine interest and cares for them” (2009).

Teaching is not like any other job that people do to earn their living. It should rather be seen as an involvement to help others discover and progress. It entails giving the best of one’s experience despite obstacles and difficulties. This devotion to this profession makes it quite unique in the sense that it requires individuals who not only have particular qualifications, but also noticeable humane attributes.

Research question

The present paper attempts to raise the question of what makes the good or ideal English teacher according to students at Djilali Liabes university (Algeria), is it the academic qualifications/he has accumulated or is it also his/her qualities as a person? And in any case what are they?

Hypothesis

Starting from the obvious fact that teacher is a person; our presumption is that the teacher’s personality traits are at least as influential as pedagogical knowledge in respect to classroom teaching/learning outcomes.

Qualities of the Efficient Teacher

What do students mean by a “good teacher”? Learners evaluate their teachers on the basis of their conception of the IDEAL teacher. Yet, expectations of a good teacher may be quite culture bound. Some features may be highly desired in one context and considered inappropriate in another. Ryan, SM, (2008) made a comparative study between Japanese and
Russian university students concerning their expectations of the good teacher. This study revealed that although there seems to be common agreement among the two groups of respondents, the most frequently reported answers being: friendly, enthusiastic, understandable; there are features which seem to be more culture specific. Thus while Japanese students gave priority to reliability, intelligence, equality; Russian learners preferred the teacher who knows the subject matter, who is competent and is professional. Another comparative study was conducted by Al-Maqtri, A. & Thabet, A. (2012) who examined the qualities of the good teacher as perceived by Saudi and Yemeni learners of English. They discovered that unlike Yemenis, Saudi respondents consider as a good teacher the one who has a good command of English, is competent, but does not give too much homework nor difficult tests. So learners’ perceptions and expectations of the good teacher probably reflect specific socio-cultural conditions as including teachers’ social ranks, place of education, attitudes towards learning, etc… In addition to this, it may be reasonable to assume that teachers’ attributes and qualifications may vary depending on the age of the learners; such as children supposedly requiring more patience than adults.

Research in educational psychology and applied linguistics examines the issue of the” good teacher ” in terms of lists of variables that are most likely to influence the latter’s attitudes and performance in class. Ultimately such variables are discussed as influential factors in the learners’ outcome. Among them we may draw the following lists which are by no means exhaustive nor absolute.

**Professional related qualities**
- Preparedness
- Skill of transmission of knowledge
- Setting realistic goals
- Knowledge of the subject to be taught
- Skill of transmission of knowledge
- having enough methodology information

**Further qualities of the FL teacher**
- A high proficiency level in the four skills of the TL
- An awareness of the target culture

**Personality related qualities**
- Having a sense of humor
- Motivation
- Autonomy
- Intellectual integrity
- Being fair to everyone
- Self confidence
- Not being perfectionist
- Accessibility
- Humility
- Having a sense of humor
- Passion and enthusiasm
- Creativity
- Flexibility and openness
- Patience
- Respect
- Empathy
- Tolerance
Dealing with the characteristics of foreign language teachers, Borg, S. (2006) argues that language teachers are in many respects different from other content teachers, “…language teachers are seen to be distinctive in terms of the nature of subject, the content of teaching, the teaching methodology, teacher-learner relationships, and contrasts between native and non-native speakers”.

Studies on effective teacher characteristics (see Dinçer, A. et al 2013) list four major categories of variables, namely: Socio-affective skills, pedagogical knowledge, subject-matter knowledge and personality traits. On the last variable (which is the major concern of this work), Dincer, A. et al (ibid) remind that “people who work in any profession indispensably bring their personal characteristics in the working environment. This is also valid for teachers who not only are human beings but also deal with human”. In this respect various facets of teachers’ personality are investigated among which: being tolerant, patient, caring, enthusiastic, open-minded, creative, optimistic, flexible, having positive attitudes, and sense of humor (see Shishavan & Sadeghin, 2009). The aim of this work is not to give priority to one category of characteristics over the other; a good teacher has probably a great deal of professional as well as human features that do all help him in his task.

Survey

In order to find out what our students refer to in respect to the issue of question of “the good teacher”, two (02) groups of students of the English department, Djilali Liabès University in Algeria have been taken as a sample:
Group one: 92 second year BA students
Group two: 44 Master students
The students were asked:
- 1- If you have only one choice, do you prefer to have :
  - A- A highly competent, intelligent but distant, teacher?
  - B- A caring, flexible but less competent teacher?
- 2- Why? Give as many reasons as you wish.
- 3- What are according to you the most important characteristics of the “efficient teacher”?
  - A- Professional characteristics
  - B- Humane characteristics
- 4- Please make your own list of the variables in each category.

Questions 2 as well as 3a and 3b and 4 were deliberately left open, the author not wanting to influence students’ responses. By doing so, it was hoped that the respondents would provide personal, various, and maybe unexpected answers.
Discussion

The small-scale survey research revealed that the 2 groups (with 2 levels of education) of students would rather have teachers who are not necessarily highly competent in the subject matter, but who have some human or personality attributes.

Table 1: BA students

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Characteristics</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Humane characteristics</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Professional characteristics</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: Master students

Besides among the positive attributes students wished to find in their “ideal” teachers, the most frequently reported ones were the teacher who:

1- “knows how to transmit information”
2- “is caring and nice”
3- “gives us good advice”
4- “guesses our difficulties”
5- “is not always in a hurry, who gives us time to understand and work”
6- “gives us the chance to express ourselves”
7- “respects us and does not humiliate us”
8- “speaks good English”
9- “understands us and our difficulties”
10- “always listens to us and helps us when we need him”

Regarding the rationale behind the “preference” for teachers personal over purely professional assets, students explained roughly that internet, books and other teachers may provide them with further information if/when needed.

Since in this study students reported to favor personality traits over purely professional ones, it may be worth examining two of these qualities that seem to portray what our learners have expressed. Features N°4, N°9, and even N°2 may relate to a personality trait which is empathy; whereas N°3, N°5, and N°10 may be assimilated to generosity.
Empathy

Defining empathy appears to be tricky as this concept may be seen from either cognitive or affective angles, and thus defined by psychologists, neuroscientists, or educationalists for example. In the present work empathy is defined as a person’s sensitivity and understanding of others’ emotions and thoughts. Beneath the empathic person there is often someone who is interested in the other, someone who not only is attentive to the feelings and attitudes of the others, but who also respects them per se. Empathy is often related to caring, Tettegah, S. (2007) explains that teacher empathy consists of

...the ability to express concern and take the perspective of a student, and it involves cognitive and affective domains of empathy. This conscious or unconscious process may involve an awareness of a student’s feelings and the ability to put herself in the student’s place and feel what the student feels” (p.19)

In a research on Hong Kong learners' perceptions of the good teacher, Yuen Yee (2003) explains that the empathic “language teacher has the ability and willingness to step inside a student’s shoes in order to feel what the student is going through earning a language”. The empathic teacher observes and senses the affective tone if her/his class. S/he is capable of identifying and understanding learners’ feelings, and through her/his overall attitude, will communicates this understanding to them.

Generosity

The word generosity derives from the Latin generous which means noble birth. As used today, it refers to a personality trait found in high quality, good people. Such individuals not only often share what they have with others, but they get pleasure from doing so. Compared to other personality attributes as motivation, attitude, introversion and extraversion for example, generosity is not much debated in the related literature. In this work generosity is highlighted for the reason that:

a- It reflects what our students wish to find in their teachers as mentioned above (although they do not name it as such).

b- We believe that teaching is a profession based on giving of one’s time, energy, patience, attention, etc… and that, generous persons who happen also to be teachers will naturally do that.

If the generous person is the one who often goes beyond what is expected from her/him, then the generous teacher is that who volunteers to do extra work, who is willing to help, give of his/her time and provide support whenever needed. Above all s/he will do all this quite spontaneously as this is the way s/he is in life. This generosity unsurprisingly transpires in the practice of his/her job.
Conclusion

It is acknowledged in this work that while many standards of efficient teaching may be acquired owing to training and experience; it remains hard to affect change in a teacher’s personality. Nevertheless, making teachers aware that their personality is most likely to influence their performance and practice in class can make them reflect on this aspect. Pointing at what might influence the outcome of a classroom situation together with evidence to support it will undoubtedly make teachers look differently at their profession.

The present research revealed that most students are sensitive to their teachers’ personalities; they even claim that these are often more influential than purely professional qualifications. We may as well take notice of the fact that the respondents in this study are adults who are relatively autonomous; may explain their position. Indeed learner autonomy is a major pedagogical target in our educational context, and students are progressively guided towards relying on themselves and actively controlling their own learning.

Concerning the desired personality attributes as they have appeared in this study, i.e. empathy and generosity; we may underline that these are human characteristics that undoubtedly many teachers have naturally, but many others need to make the effort to cultivate. This is certainly a complex issue, yet like with any sensitive exercise; becoming aware of something is already one step towards success. Finally, there is no doubt that a large scale empirical research with various personality variables is needed in order to better highlight the link between efficiency in teaching and the teacher not only as a practitioner but also as a person.
References


