



QUALITIES OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHERS AS PERCEIVED BY SLOVAK EFL STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

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Abstract:

This paper attempts to examine the characteristics of EFL teachers in Slovakia, focusing on the most important qualities of language teachers. The main objective of this article is to discover which characteristics are important for the effective educational process with regard to EFL teaching as perceived by the Slovak EFL students and teachers. A convenient sample of teachers (n = 32) and students (n = 45) were selected to take part in this study. The research method that was employed to achieve the research objectives was the questionnaire-based survey. The obtained data were categorized under three groups: English subject matter, pedagogical skills and knowledge, and socio-affective skills and personality traits. Apart from highlighting the most important features of language teachers within the three groups, the study also offers some insight on items that were perceived differently by the students and teachers. Finally, the results are interpreted, conclusions drawn, and pedagogical implications are provided.

Keywords: EFL teacher, EFL student, effective language teaching and learning, qualities of language teachers

1. Introduction

Instructors occupy a pivotal role in the educational process (Başal, 2014) as they guide their students throughout their studies, but what is more, they also influence their beliefs, views, attitudes, and values. Teachers' personality and their domain-specific characteristics and qualities demonstrate a deep influence on the effectiveness of the educational process and can be therefore regarded as a major determinant of the successful language learning.

On a daily basis, teachers are entrusted with the task of promoting the cognitive or affective development of their learners. However, it should be mentioned that every

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teacher is a specific and unique person, having their own personality and ability traits, characteristics, and qualities, along with specific values, attitudes, and experience. Occupying these professional roles and competencies, the one who wants to become a teacher must be professionally competent and possessing those important personality and ability traits enables them to act accordingly and appropriately in various situations. Teacher's characteristics and qualities determine whether education is effective, and their personal characteristics and qualities may have a profound impact on students' learning and performance. Investigating these characteristics is valuable for all the participants in the educational process, the learners and teachers. Instructors can understand what is important within learning a foreign language to their students and they can act in a way that can benefit their students' learning process according to various expectations. Accordingly, they can advance their pedagogical and didactical methods through genuine reflection which could result in enhancing the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process.

2. Effective Foreign Language Teacher

Despite the fact that plethora of general definitions of effective teachers can be found in the literature, the field of foreign language proposes diverse objectives, outcomes, tasks, techniques, or methods that somehow differ from those of other teaching subjects. To identify the qualities of foreign language teachers, the uniqueness of the subject needs to be taken into account.

Being a foreign language teacher is in many ways exceptional when it comes to the teaching profession. Therefore, becoming a good and effective foreign language teacher is not an easy task as apart from professional competences, one needs to possess a set of personality features and other skills and abilities which will make the process of L2 teaching and learning effective. Thus, the effectiveness of foreign language teachers is seen as very critical.

For a clearer understanding, Borg (2006) conducted a comparative analysis that investigates actual classroom practices and he has revealed in which areas English language teaching differs from the teaching of other subjects.

First, it is the nature of the subject matter itself – because the EFL teachers use a medium (the language of instruction is not the native language but the foreign language) that students may not understand yet. They are expected to use the target language as the medium of instruction during the teaching and learning process. This means that the teacher needs to have a certain advanced proficiency in a target language, but at the same time, they have to be able to adjust and simplify the language according to students' proficiency levels (Kourieos & Evripidou, 2013). Secondly, it is about the interaction patterns necessary to provide instruction – including interaction patterns such as group work or pair work for effective language learning. Group work is very unique in teaching foreign languages because in its nature, it requires discussions, communication, and using the language with authenticity (Borg, 2006). Finally, it is the need for the outside

support for learning the subject – seeking ways of providing extracurricular activities to create more natural learning (Borg, 2006).

Effective language teachers' characteristics have been studied and explored to a great extent (e.g. Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, Al-Siyabi & Al-Maamari, 2015; Alimorad & Tajgozari, 2016; Barnes & Lock, 2013; Brown, 2009; Çelik, Arikan & Caner, 2013; Delaney, Johnson, Johnson & Treslan, 2010; Park & Lee, 20016, Ramazani, 2014; Sabbah, 2018; Stronge, 2018), even though the majority of researches focused on the effectivity of teaching outside the domain of foreign language education. The field of foreign language teaching still lacks studies which would be of a domain-specific nature in terms of foreign languages. Identifying and recognizing the most important qualities of a language teacher need to be under continual examination and exploration.

For the purposes of identifying the main features that are important for effective EFL teachers, we decided to arise out of the following categories which are primarily presented in the literature (Arikan et al., 2008; Borg, 2006; Park and Lee, 2006, Badawood, 2015 or Richards et al., 2013.). The final version of categories had been slightly modified for the purposes of this research, consisting of diverse items in three groups, namely English subject-matter knowledge (or in other words English proficiency level), pedagogical skills, and socio-affective skills. As a matter of fact, specifically in the field of foreign language teaching, subject matter knowledge alludes to English language proficiency, socio-affective skills to teachers' personality traits, and pedagogical knowledge refers to language acquisition theories, teaching methods or techniques and testing. Despite many differences between the various categorizations introduced by numerous authors, there is some agreement about the characteristics that are essential for foreign language teachers. Many researchers focused on the above-mentioned categories, which in their perception represent the basics of effective EFL teachers. Regarding the concept of effective language teaching, there exist some unique characteristics for language teachers that should be followed by general and overall qualities of effective teachers as such.

3. Material and Methods

The main aim of this study is to investigate and identify the characteristics and qualities of effective EFL teachers as viewed and perceived by EFL students and teachers in Slovakia. The research method applied was a Likert-type questionnaire, on the basis of which the perceptions of Slovak EFL students and teachers were analyzed.

The research participants were comprised of two groups: EFL learners studying at the Slovak upper-secondary school levels (*Gymnázium* type of school) and EFL teachers at the Slovak upper-secondary school levels. Out of the 45 students, who were in the last year of their studies, 19 were males and 26 were females, being 18.5 years of age on average. Their English proficiency was at the B2 CEFR level. The total of 32 teachers consisted of 7 males and 25 females and the information on the teacher participants can be found in Table 1.

Table 1: Teachers

Variable	Options	No.	%
Gender	Male	7	21.9%
	Female	25	78.1%
Age	24-29	10	31.2%
	30-35	14	43.8%
	36-44	5	15.6%
	Over 45	3	9.4%
Academic Qualification	Bachelor's degree	1	3.1%
	Master's degree	28	87.5%
	Doctorate	3	9.4%
English Level Specialization	Beginner	-	-
	Intermediate	7	21.9%
	Upper-intermediate	3	9.40%
	Advanced	1	3.1%
	All of the above	21	65.6%
English Teaching Practice	Less than 1 year	3	9.4%
	1-5 years	6	18.7%
	6-10 years	11	34.4%
	11 – 15 years	7	21.9%
	Over 15 years	5	15.6%

The questionnaire items were grouped according to three categories: English subject matter, pedagogical skills and knowledge, and socio-affective skills and personality.

4. Results and Discussion

Table 2 contains the obtained data on the questionnaire statements. Only statements rated as very important or important, when combined gained at least 70% altogether, have been analyzed and discussed. For instance, when a statement was regarded as important by 10 teachers and rated as very important by 14 teachers, the numbers were totaled what resulted in the fact that 75% of teachers consider the given feature important. The analysis of items that reached at least 70% of importance could be regarded as reliable for this type of research as the generalization of the overall characteristics of the ideal teacher as perceived by the majority of respondents can be further discussed.

Similarly, attention was paid to statements that were perceived differently by teachers and students. The contrasted items are important to notice due to the fact that this piece of information provides a clearer idea of what is expected by teachers in comparison to the students' perceptions in terms of the qualities of an effective foreign language teacher.

As can be observed, the most items regarded as important – five statements were in the first category – English subject-matter, while the least amount of important items were in the second category – pedagogical skills and knowledge, even though this category contained the largest number of statements. The category of socio-affective skills

could be perceived as the second most important category, with four statements rated as important out of the total of eight statements.

Table 2: Questionnaire items regarded as important

Category	Number of statements	Statements received at least 70% of importance	The contrastable statements
English Subject-Matter	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be knowledgeable (teachers: 100%, students: 82.2%), • be the continual learner of English language (teachers: 93.7%, students: 84.4%), • have advanced proficiency in the target language (teachers: 90.6%, students: 95.5%), • pronounce English well (teacher: 71.9%, students: 86.7%), • be fully conversant with English grammar (teachers: 93.8%, students: 73.3%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • use native language when teaching English (teachers: 65.63%, students: 0%) • know English culture well (teachers: 75%, students: 8.89%)
		Σ 5 Items	
Pedagogical Skills and Knowledge	10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be well prepared for every lesson (teachers: 87.5%, students: 75.6%), • allow students to be as active as possible during the process (teachers: 93.8%, students: 71.1%). • arouse students' motivation for learning English (teachers: 71.88%, students: 80%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • allow students to decide what they want to learn and how (teachers: 62.5% students: 22.2%)
		Σ 3 Items	
Socio-Affective Skills and Personality Traits	8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • build a strong student-teacher relationship (teachers: 84.38%, students: 82.22%) • be friendly to his students (teachers: 93.75%, students: 86.67%) • do not discriminate between students and treat them fairly, (teachers: 100%, students: 100%) • value students as unique individuals (teachers: 75%, students: 91.11%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • be serious (teachers: 84.38%, students: 6.67%)
		Σ 4 Items	

4.1 English Subject Matter Knowledge

In this category, participants were asked to rate eight items related to effective EFL teachers' expertise in the English language. According to the students' and teachers' responses, the most important characteristics of a good and effective English language teacher are within this category – five out of the eight statements are deemed important, making the whole category as more important in comparison to the pedagogical skills or socio-affective skills.

In this group, the results showed that students as well as teachers believe that to be an effective teacher, the following qualities are essential. The teacher has to be knowledgeable, possessing advanced of English proficiency, but at the same time, they have to continually work on their language. As far as the language systems are concerned, they need to pronounce English well and they ought to be fully conversant with the English grammar. Employing the native language and the good knowledge of English culture was perceived differently by the students and the teachers. Interestingly, the teachers attached much greater importance on the use of L1 when teaching English, while the students did not consider this important at all. On the other hand, the teachers assigned much more importance to having a good knowledge about English culture, unlike their student counterparts.

4.2 Pedagogical Skills and Knowledge

In this category, the results revealed that students and teachers believe that to be an effective teacher, the following characteristics are essential. The instructors need to be well prepared for each lesson. They should allow students to be as active during the teaching and learning process as possible, possibly by employing a lot of pair-work and group-work activities. Moreover, it is also teachers' responsibility to arouse their learners' motivation. Allowing students to decide what they wish to learn, which is one of the features of the Communicative Language Teaching, was assigned a higher priority by the teachers in comparison to the students' responses.

4.3 Socio-affective Skills and Personality Traits

Based on the data obtained within this category, it is important that the language teachers possess the following qualities. The instructor needs to build a strong relationship between them and their students. Moreover, they need to be friendly, value students as unique individuals, but not discriminating between students. Finally, they have to treat them fairly. The quality of being serious was assigned a low priority by the students, but the teachers regarded this statement as rather important.

5. Conclusions, Limitations, and Recommendations

Employing the Likert-type questionnaire, this study attempted to investigate the important characteristics of foreign language teachers. The most important qualities

comprise of twelve statements rated as important or very important by more than 70% of the participants.

It can be concluded that the effective language teacher should be knowledgeable (understand what they are teaching), be a continual learner of English language, have advanced proficiency in the target language, pronounce English well, be fully conversant with English grammar, be well prepared for every lesson, allow students to be active during the process, arouse students' motivation for learning English, build a strong student-teacher relationship, be friendly to students, not discriminating between students and treating them fairly as well as valuing them as unique individuals.

The statements which were perceived differently ought to be paid attention too. A relatively high number of teachers regard using L1 while teaching English, knowing English culture, allowing students to decide what they want to learn (and how), and being serious as important, which is in contrast with the perception of their learner counterparts. Especially the use of L1 during the teaching and learning process is often a sensitive issue and opinions on this matter vary. One of the approaches suggests that instructors use as much L2 as possible, employing the native tongue only when it facilitates and enhances the learning process.

This study is by no means comprehensive due to the limited number of respondents and restricted research settings. It should be, however, emphasized that this topic requires more careful attention and that further investigation in the context of Slovak EFL teaching and learning is needed. It is hoped that this study offers some practical implications for other teachers and researchers and that it provides an impetus for further examination of effective foreign language teachers.

Conflict of interest

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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