



CHARACTERISTICS OF AN EFFECTIVE EFL TEACHER: PERSPECTIVES OF SLOVAK EFL STUDENTS AND TEACHERS

Renáta Tarajová,

Rastislav Metrukⁱ

Department of English Language and Literature,
Faculty of Humanities,
University of Žilina,
Slovakia

Abstract:

Teachers, scholars, and researchers have always been interested in examining the qualities of good and effective teaching and this type of investigation appears to be beneficial for both EFL teachers and learners. In line with those investigations, this study attempts to explore the Slovak EFL students' and teachers' perceptions of an effective EFL teacher. To achieve the research objectives, a convenient sample of Slovak EFL students (n = 45) and teachers (n = 32) were employed. An open-ended question questionnaire was created and distributed in order to gather the data. The research results indicate that there exists some agreement between the two targeted groups, but also some discrepancies between the students and teachers as regards their perception of effective EFL teaching. Further investigation into this is necessary to shed more light on this matter.

Keywords: EFL teacher, EFL student, effective language teacher, student and teacher perspective

1. Introduction

There have been many attempts to define effectivity in teaching and effective teachers as such recently. Generally speaking, effective teachers require not only knowledge, but also skills that are desirable to achieve goals. They also need to be able to use this knowledge and these skills properly if the goals are to be achieved. While focusing on the qualities of an ideal language teacher, the definitions of the terms such as effective teachers ought to be provided.

The definition of "effective" has been interpreted in various ways in different fields such as science, law, and the like. However, one of the favorable definitions is

ⁱ Correspondence: email rastislav.metruk@fhv.uniza.sk

offered by the Oxford Learners Dictionary, which suggests that being effective means *“producing the result that is wanted or intended; producing a successful result”* (Oxford Learning Dictionaries). As described by Roy and Halder (2018, p. 914). the word effectiveness originated in the Latin language from the word *“effictivus”* (meaning creative or effective) and can have many other synonyms, basically referring to the same concept – efficacy, successfulness, productiveness, potency, etc. What is important about the basis of this word is that the word itself explains its meaning. To be effective in doing something means to be potent or successful in achieving a desirable effect. Therefore, most of the literature definitions agree on the point that an effective teacher is the one who can teach their students effectively, successfully, and fruitfully. An effective teacher is, by means of applying specific methods and techniques, successful in producing a pleasurable result in education.

“[Effective teachers with their] scientific temperament, positive attitudes, value orientation, value judgment, and ability to adjust in an ever-changing psycho-social environment ... helps the students in their optimal all-round development, prepares them for the forthcoming competition in life by upholding their curricular and co-curricular performance.” (Roy and Halder, 2018, pp. 914–915)

To understand what makes a teacher effective in the educational process has been questioned and explored by numerous educational scholars and researchers for many years. Stronge (2018) or Benson et. al. (2001) suggest that focusing on the output of teaching, an effective teacher is someone who produces the class of high-achieving students. Moreover, they are also positively evaluated by supervisors, and finally, it is someone who *“provides information to students in a way that is clear, understandable, and motivating”* (Arikan et. al., 2008, p. 43). Thus, effective teachers are described as clear and specific in the use of language, incorporate detailed explanations, monitor progress, set realistic educational goals, and the like. These instructors are able to teach students as professionally as they possibly can. *“In order to keep the continuity in attaining high-quality teaching and learning atmosphere, it is necessary to maintain a workforce of effective teachers who create positive learning spaces”* (Arikan et. al., 2008, p. 43). In other words, the author necessitates the importance of effectivity within this profession in order to support the learning atmosphere that leads towards the effective teaching of students in the classroom. To be more precise, effective teaching leads to effective learning. The most generalized definition of an effective teacher is probably offered by Hunt (2009), who explains teacher effectiveness as:

The collection of characteristics, competencies, and behaviors of teachers at all educational levels that enable students to reach desired outcomes, which may include the attainment of specific learning objectives as well as broader goals such as being able to solve problems, think critically, work collaboratively, and become effective citizens (Hunt, 2009, p. 1).

What makes teachers effective in the educational process is the question of prime importance for everyone concerned within education. The studies and papers contributing to the effectiveness of teachers have been conducted by numerous scholars who aimed at investigating the quality of teaching in education. Numerous studies had been probed to discover the most important qualities of effective teachers of academic subjects.

The first comprehensive study was completed in 1957. The most appreciated qualities of teachers as perceived by secondary-school principals were “[m]astery of subject-matter, motivation, dedication to the profession, creative techniques, efficiency, discipline, punctuality, ability to approach students, and particular time for students” (Calabria, 1960, p. 92). According to the above-mentioned study, it is crucial to recognize that during that time, personality traits of the teacher were not comprehended as one of the important factors perceived to be among the most appreciated qualities of teachers. Another study conducted to approach the important qualities of effective teachers was done by Feldman (1986). He discovered that the most important qualities perceived by students are “positive self-regard, energy, enthusiasm and positive regard for others” (p. 146). In this study, conversely, students perceive the most important qualities of teachers to be teachers’ personality traits, not their organizational or managerial skills.

The newer views of teaching in terms of effectiveness originate from a complementary perspective. Besides the instructional methodology, it is crucial to reconsider that exceptional teachers are described in terms of teacher-student relationships.

Our belief—based on 15 years of research with more than 50,000 students and teachers in The Netherlands, the United States, and Australia—is that a teacher's interpersonal skills are crucial to creating and maintaining a positive working climate. Essentially, effective teachers have to be excellent communicators as well as fine technicians (Wubbels et al., 1997, p. 82).

These researchers suggest that besides technical and managerial skills, teachers’ effectivity lies in being flexible in their abilities; in other words, teachers need to be both dominant and cooperative, empathetic, yet in control. Thus, the characteristics of effective teachers can be classified into two broader categories. First, an effective teacher possesses certain personality qualities and attitudes, which ultimately influence the class climate, stress-free environment, and create a better learning environment for students. Secondly, they have to be professional in a sense that an effective teacher should have adequate and comprehensive knowledge of the content and subject-matter as well as pedagogy and didactics.

The more contemporary studies which attempted to examine the qualities of a good and effective language teachers involve e.g. Alimorad & Tajgozari, 2016; Brown, 2009; Çelik, Arikan & Caner, 2013; Park & Lee, 2016; Sabbah, 2018 or Stronge, 2018).

2. Method

This paper aims at examining the qualities of an effective EFL teachers from the standpoint of EFL students and teachers. For the purposes of this research, the following research questions were formulated.

1. How do the EFL students and teachers understand the concept of EFL teaching?
2. What are the most important features of effective language teachers?
3. Which of the characteristics (English language knowledge, pedagogy knowledge, personality) contributes most to being an effective language teacher?
4. How should the future teachers be trained in order to become effective language teachers?

The participants consisted of two groups: 45 EFL learners (19 males and 26 females) studying at the Slovak upper-secondary school levels and 32 EFL teachers (7 males and 25 females) at the Slovak upper-secondary school levels. On average, the students were 18.5 years of age and their level of English proficiency was at the B2 CEFR level.

The open-ended questionnaire questions have been employed for the purposes of our study. The overall goal of utilizing open-ended questions was to encourage students to express their viewpoints openly and freely about the effectiveness of teaching, and specific characteristics and qualities of English language teachers.

The following questions have been formulated:

1. How do you understand the concept of effective language teaching?
2. What are the most significant characteristics of an effective teacher, do you think?
3. Which of the following characteristics contribute most towards being an effective language Teacher, do you think? The knowledge of English language, knowledge of pedagogy, or his/her personality and the way he/she behaves to the students? Why?
4. How should the pre-service teachers be trained in order to become effective English language teachers, do you think?

Answers to these questions were analyzed qualitatively – they were carefully analyzed in order to identify reoccurring ideas and then they were sorted out according to the basic concept ideas mentioned in the answers.

3. Results

Question 1: How do you understand the concept of effective language teaching?

The first question aimed to gather ideas of teachers and students about the general concept of effective teaching in Slovakia.

This concept was understood by teachers as predominantly a student-centered one since the majority of teachers ($n = 24$; 75%) tend to stress essentially the active participation of students in the real-life and authentic topics which, according to the teachers, strongly corresponds with the ability of students to remember new aspects of a

language for a much longer time than just by sitting passively during an English lesson. Teacher no. 5 maintains that “[t]he students do not sit passively, but are active in the lessons and learn the most in the lessons and do not have to take any extra tasks outside of school”. In a similar way, teacher no. 18 concluded that “[e]ffective teaching looks for the ways how to make learners involved in learning in a way that helps them to achieve the best results.” Therefore, the answers revealed that the majority of teachers believe that effective learning happens in a class in which students interact and participate continuously in the learning activities. In other words, the center of attention, in foreign language classrooms principally, is switched to the learners and they act as actively engaged participants. This can be regarded as one of the key principles of the Communicative Language Teaching – the role of students had shifted from being passive participant to becoming actively engaged members of the process of teaching and learning English.

Interestingly, the vast majority of students agreed with the opinions of teachers about the concept of effective teaching. 36 students out of 45, which accounts for 80%, agreed that effective teaching is connected to as much of the active participation as possible. Most of the students stressed the importance of pair work and the utilization of productive skills (writing and speaking). Many students emphasized the use of language in real-life situations while not working only with students' books. They prioritized authentic communication within real-life topics, role-plays, and simulations. According to student no. 19 “[e]ffective teaching happens when students enjoy studying and are involved in studying”. Student no. 30 also asserted that “[e]ffective teaching is when the teacher leads students to be active and is creative with activities so we can use our skills, grammar, and vocabulary in real-life topic simulations”. Similarly, student no. 44 concluded that “I think that the most effective lesson is when students are involved in conversations; we should speak with each other more”. Finally, student no. 6 also emphasized the importance of “making conversations so they can put the grammar/vocabulary they have learned into practice”.

Question 2: What are the most significant characteristics of an effective teacher, do you think?

This question aimed at exploring students' and teachers' opinions about the characteristics of an effective language teacher. The answers were more diverse within this question. However, a certain amount of agreement between the students and teachers can still be detected.

13 teachers (40.6%) were think that the most important quality of an effective language teacher is connected to the teacher's ability to use various teaching methods and strategies and their ability to creatively and flexibly adjust them to students' needs and proficiency levels. Teacher no. 9 maintained that “[e]ffective teachers use different strategies which they adjust according to their students' needs creatively”. Teacher no. 17 indicated that “[i]n my opinion, teachers who want to be effective need to modify the strategies and approaches adequately and often”. Almost similarly, teacher no. 29 stated that “[t]hey should know their students, their diverse learning styles and of course should be able to use various methods and techniques accordingly during the lesson. Effective teachers should ensure that every

activity used in the classroom enables students to learn new grammar structures, the new vocabulary, etc."

But more than half of the teachers (17; 53.1%) emphasized that effective teachers should first and foremost have a deep interest in the subject, along with high expertise in the subject-matter they are teaching and the passion for the profession. Teacher no. 23 stated: *"to be as much knowledgeable as possible about the subject-matter he teaches"*; or teacher no. 31 asserted that *"[e]ffective teacher should first and foremost have sufficient knowledge of English language, alongside with proper pronunciation and wide vocabulary use so he is able to transfer the correct knowledge to his students"*.

Only 2 teachers (6.3%) stressed the significance of the teacher's personality and characteristics – they mentioned open-mindedness, reliability, self-confidence, optimism, and equity. Alongside with the results of this question, it can be assumed that for the teachers, generally speaking, the expertise of the subject matter is rated as the most important, while some of the teachers rate the advanced level of pedagogical knowledge (various methods and techniques) as significantly important for the effective language teaching. It appears that teachers understand that a high command of English is beneficial for the overall teaching and learning process in the foreign language classroom as the mastery of language skills on the part of the teacher may be motivational and provide stimulation for students to continue studying the language. Insufficient knowledge of the language can create the burdening and stressing aspects of the process such as incomprehensibly stated goals, misunderstandings in communication, misinterpretations of the knowledge, insecurities while speaking, and the like.

As far as the students' responses are taken into account, the opinions about effective language teacher characteristics were two-sided. Most of the students (31; 68.8%) highlighted the importance of the personality traits of the teacher that is in their opinion the most effective in teaching the language to them. Students suggested that an effective language teacher is an individual who can keep a positive relationship with their students, so the most appreciated characteristics were friendliness, politeness, patience, or tolerance. Student no. 13 highlighted a *"good relationship with students by being friendly and polite and not too strict"*. Student no. 27 mentioned that *"I appreciate when he/she is patient and helpful even when you have personal problems not just school problems"*.

Other students (14; 31.1%) emphasized that effective language teachers should be able to explain the curriculum in a simple and natural manner – a way that is interesting and catchy for students and which eventually makes them more active in the process. Here, students tended to highlight the high command of the English language while being able to communicate in a clear and comprehensible way. For instance, student no. 42 mentioned: *"I think that the most important characteristic of an effective language teacher is his ability to explain things efficiently and in a simple way while trying to make the lesson interesting."* Student no. 1 concluded that *"[f]or me, the most important characteristic of an effective teacher is mainly the ability to present the content in an interesting way and by using various strategies"*, while student no. 3 made an interesting point by saying: *"The teacher can be more effective in school when he/she can keep me focused and active during the lesson by*

using various interesting activities, such as communicative games and then I can really remember what we have been doing during the lesson. Similarly, the teacher has to know the language grammar and vocabulary perfectly”.

Apparently, a high correlation could be observed between the opinions of students and teachers on the most important characteristic of an effective English language teacher. Teachers and students highlighted that effective teacher needs to use various and interesting techniques and strategies during the lesson to keep students active and motivated. Nonetheless, teachers and students held different beliefs about the personality of the language teacher as in general, teachers did not consider the personality traits of the language teachers to be important, whereas most of the students highlighted its significance. Based on these viewpoints, it could be assumed that teachers are more concerned with the qualities and knowledge which could have been developed through academic education in language and professional training in EFL methodology.

Question 3: Which of the following characteristics contribute most towards being an effective language teacher, do you think? The knowledge of English language, knowledge of pedagogy, or his/her personality and the way he/she behaves to the students? Why?

The majority of students (37; 82.2%) agreed that the personality of a teacher contributes most towards effective language teaching. However, many students tended to emphasize the combination of the English knowledge with the teachers' personality. The answers almost completely matched the results of the preceding question and the main idea of their reasons remains in most cases similar. For example, student no. 42 mentioned that *“it is the way he/she behaves to students because if we get on well together, students are more motivated to study English and speak more”*, or Student no.41 claimed that *“[i]f you do not like your teacher you are more likely to dislike the whole subject and therefore you will not put much effort to studying”*. Student no. 14 also made an interesting point by maintaining that *“English language teacher needs to be of a kind personality because the subject of English language is based on communication in a foreign language and students are more likely to participate more with the teacher who is friendly and kind.”* The combination of the knowledge of the English language with the teachers' personality was also highlighted by student no. 12 who pointed out that *“[m]ost important is the knowledge of language combined with a good personality because she/he can speak the language accurately and when having a kind personality, students want to communicate with him/her”*.

While the students gave more weight to personality traits of a teacher and the way they behave to their students in a combination with his their expertise in the English language, the teachers tended to advocate the mixture of all of the aforementioned, including pedagogical skills and knowledge of teaching methodology, which was not mentioned by the students at all. According to the majority of teachers (27; 84.4%), it is not possible to choose just one quality, while only the combination of all the features can make the teacher effective. Besides personality factors, good knowledge of the language and pedagogy characterize and define an effective English language teacher. The

pedagogy with personality traits is counterproductive, while the teacher needs to have certain specific knowledge of ELT methodology. Similarly, once teachers are not equipped with relevant pedagogical knowledge, a foreign language cannot be transmitted to students adequately (Shulman, 1987). Teacher no.14 claims that *"[i]t is a mixture of all. It is not only about language and pedagogy, but working with people (especially with children) needs also specific personality traits."* Teacher no. 5 concluded that *"[o]f course, ideally, the combination of all, but if I had to choose according to importance, I'd say: 1. Knowledge of language comes first as teachers should be able to use English naturally and effectively both inside and outside of the classroom – this is an essential requirement. 2. Behavior and attitude towards students as learning and teaching are social activities involving various people, and then 3. – knowledge of pedagogy would come third as most of the essential lessons can be taught through reflecting on one's teaching practice and getting feedback from colleagues (and students)."*

Teachers' recognition of pedagogical or didactic knowledge and teaching methodology might be based on their practical experience with the pros of pedagogical knowledge and skills during the lesson. Teachers understand that general pedagogical knowledge is the key factor in creating an effective teaching/learning environment in the classroom. It contains the understanding of the overall instructional practices or various teaching strategies, awareness of classroom variables, expertise in management styles, the importance of monitoring and assessment, etc. (OECD, 2009, pp. 113 – 119). Students did not recognize the importance of it, as they might not be fully aware of what teacher profession involves and how complex the whole teaching process is.

Question 4: How should the pre-service teachers be trained in order to become effective English language teachers, do you think?

In this question, the highest number of teachers (28; 87.5%) put an emphasis on more practical training during studies of EFL learners. Teachers agreed that the most important for students of teaching programs is to have more opportunities for gaining teaching experience during studies. As stated by Burns and Richards (2009, p. 4) *"teacher learning is not viewed as translating knowledge and theories into practice but rather as constructing new knowledge and theory through participating in specific social contexts and engaging in particular types of activities and processes"*.

Teachers widely recognized that for students of teaching, it is very important to have the opportunity to use knowledge (mainly didactics) in practice. For example, teacher no. 6 stated that *"[s]tudent should be more present in the real school, to learn how it looks like; most of the things they have learned are not usable in today's school system. We do not have ideal schools. We do not have ideal students. I believe students should have more practice under the wings of young innovative teachers."* In a similar manner, teacher no. 10 concluded that *"I think they just need more practical training. I would not say that they need less theoretical knowledge but probably practice since the 1st year of their study"*. Teachers also emphasized that in order to become effective instructors, students need to participate in authentic education in real-life, but similarly they need experienced and constructive feedback from experienced teachers. Teacher no. 5 says that *"[s]tudents should be trained more*

through teaching themselves: as part of the teacher training program (teaching other teacher trainees in the group, trying things out, getting feedback, video-recording trial lessons, etc.), but, most importantly, getting direct, experienced feedback from experts". Teacher no. 28 also maintains that: *"[d]uring their teaching practice, students should be constantly mentored by good teacher trainers (effective teachers) to learn how it works, and they should be trained to manage various situations in real life, not just learning academic knowledge."* All of these views are supported by many scholars, who believe that practical experience is crucial and important in formatting their overall competences and qualities (Walace, 1991, p. 13).

As far as the students' responses are taken into account, the opinions were again diverse. However, the majority of students (n=38) agreed on the following. 17 of these students (37.8%) agreed that for students of English language teaching would be the best to go abroad and spend as much time in English speaking countries as possible, or at least interacting with native speakers. Students thought that living abroad or interacting with native speakers represent the best ways to truly learn the language. Moreover, it seems to be important as regards gaining natural accent and pick up every-day expressions. These conditions may eventually lead towards teaching students to be able to present the real-life language to their students. As student no. 35 accented *"I think that student teachers should have as many possibilities to interact with the natives during their studies as possible; the best would be to have native-speaker tutors or teachers. I believe that daily interaction with natives may be beneficial in terms of gaining new vocabulary and grammar structures that are used on a daily basis and then these teachers are more likely to be effective in teaching at school."* Similarly, student no. 1 claimed *"[i]n my opinion, it is important for them to have more opportunities to live abroad and interact with native speakers"*, or student no. 32 said that *"I think they should spend at least some months in the English speaking country in order to gain accent and flow in the language"*.

21 of the students (46.7%) and also the largest number of students agreed with the teachers' opinions that for student teachers the most important is to try and experience teaching on their own during their studies. In other words, most of the students responded that student teachers need more practical experience. This opinion is again in line with what teachers and many scholars regard as vitally important. However, students are more likely to stress the significance of guidance of other experienced teachers, who can give them constructive and valuable feedback, so they know what areas they need to improve in and work on. Student no. 35 claimed that *"[t]hey should learn more from observing experienced teachers, they should talk more about the teaching with them and take advice."* In a similar way, student no. 22 summarized that *"[t]hey should probably visit the English lessons at school where they would like to work in the future and see how instructors teach and maybe they would see what the teacher is doing wrong and learn from it."*

5. Discussion and conclusion

Overall, the students and teachers seemed to agree on the answer to the first question. Both groups suggest that it is the active participation of EFL learners that represents the general concept of effective teaching. Apparently, employing plenty of pair-work and group-work activities where students can interact and actively participate on the learning process could be regarded as one of the key features of successful language teaching and learning.

As far as the most significant characteristics of an effective teacher are concerned (question no. 2), the teachers maintained that effective instructors ought to have considerable expertise in the subject matter, deep interest, and passion for this profession. Moreover, the teachers need to have the ability to use various ways, methods, and strategies, which have to be effectively and flexibly adjusted to the students' needs and level of English. On the other hand, the students asserted that it is primarily the personality traits of a teacher which play a pivotal role as regards effective language teaching. Furthermore, good and effective instructors ought to explain the curriculum in a simple and natural way, which is interesting and makes them more active in the process.

Taking question no. 3 into consideration, the students believe that teacher personality and English language knowledge contribute most towards being an effective teacher. The teachers add to these two qualities the mastery of pedagogical skills and knowledge of methodology of teaching, suggesting that it is the mixture of the aforementioned characteristics which contributes most towards effective language teaching.

Finally, the question concerning teacher training reveals that both students and teachers think that opportunity for gaining teaching experience during their studies plays a major role and ought to be paid considerable attention. Moreover, the students indicated that visiting countries where English is spoken as L1, or at least interacting with English native speakers would prove useful as regards effective teacher training.

This study is by no means comprehensive and has its limitations in employing a relatively small sample size and limited location. A larger sampling, involving participants from other countries would definitely prove more useful and yielded more reliable results that could be generalized. This area of English language teaching merits attention of teachers and researchers and there is no doubt that carrying out further research in this area is needed and that further exploration of effective language teaching will be beneficial for both teachers and students of foreign languages.

Conflict of interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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