

Defining the effective English language teacher: Students' and teachers' perspectives

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This research aimed to explore the characteristics of effective English teachers as perceived by students and teachers at Bangkok University, Thailand based on four categories: English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, organization and communication skills, and socio-affective skills. The subjects were 400 students and 53 full-time teachers who took or taught four basic English courses in the 2008 academic year. Data were collected using a five-point rating scale questionnaire. The findings revealed that the students placed a high level of importance on all of the characteristics included in the survey, with the highest ranking given to organization and communication skills. This contrasted with the teachers, who ranked English proficiency the highest. Moreover, the findings showed no significant differences between the perceptions of male students and female students.

It is commonly accepted that the teacher factor matters to students' learning. According to Richards (2002), it is the teacher's duty to create a desirable classroom climate, to plan a variety of learning activities, and to use materials of instruction effectively. Teaching a wide range of students needs good preparation based on their interest and ability. In other words, creating and maintaining stimulating learning environments can be achieved through effective classroom organization. So, there are a lot of competencies, skills, and knowledge that the teacher must possess. In addition, another essential feature that helps to establish a positive classroom climate is teachers' personal qualities. Personal attributes like an "easygoing", "relaxed" or "open" manner can foster student motivation in the classroom. This concept is supported by Thompson (2008), who states that good teachers have a combination of strong teaching skills and positive personality traits. Good teachers make students look forward to coming to classes. As teacher quality is a crucial factor in promoting effective learning, it would be truly beneficial if teachers could know what students perceive as the characteristics of effective teachers. These perceptions will help the teachers to understand what the students expect from them and enable them to develop themselves accordingly. Also, an investigation of teachers' perceptions is required to check the balance between these two groups.



Research questions

The purpose of this study was to examine teacher characteristics which students and teachers consider as important in order to define effective language teachers in a specific cultural setting. Therefore, the research questions were posed as follows:

- What are the characteristics of effective English language teachers in the eyes of Bangkok University students?
- What are the characteristics of effective English language teachers as perceived by Language Institute teachers at Bangkok University?
- Are there any differences in perceptions toward characteristics of effective English language teachers between male and female students?

Literature review

Definitions of effective teachers

The Teaching and Learning Center at Winthrop University (2005) gives the definition of an effective teacher as follows:

An effective teacher is a scholar who shares knowledge, uses appropriate methodology, demonstrates and encourages enthusiasm about the subject matter, and shows a concern for students, all in such a way as to leave the student with a lasting and vivid conviction of having benefited from the instruction.

The Center also adds that effective teaching can be described and analyzed in at least four broad areas including (a) course development and design; (b) assessment of student performance; (c) course conduct; and (d) assessment of course, instruction, and instructor.

Neil (1991) states that effective teachers must possess a professional knowledge base and exhibit knowledge of the subject

matter. Successful teachers have a lot of instructional strategies and techniques that reflect their knowledge of the subject. Neil also indicates that because learning is a voluntary activity, the teacher's job to "sell" ideas to the students is very hard if she cannot "sell" those ideas in an interesting way. Therefore, when the teacher shows enthusiasm about her topic, she persuades the students that the topic is important.

Based on the above definitions, an effective teacher displays a wide range of skills and abilities that lead to creating a learning environment where all students feel comfortable and are sure that they can succeed both academically and personally. An effective teacher is not characterized merely by the factors of knowledge or teaching skills, but also communication skills and the relationships the teacher has with students.

Characteristics of effective language teachers

When discussing the concept of effective language teachers, we cannot ignore the concepts of procedural knowledge and declarative knowledge. According to Nunan (1999), to be effective, language teachers need these two kinds of knowledge equally. He further states that declarative knowledge includes all of the things teachers know and can articulate. It's knowledge about something, for example, about grammar rules. On the other hand, procedural knowledge includes the ability to do things or knowing how to do things, such as being able to carry on conversations in English, knowing how to plan lessons and knowing how to conduct pair work. According to Brown and Rodgers (2002), to be a good teacher in an EFL class requires a combination of a mechanical component and a mental component. The mechanical component of a lesson includes the skills required for the content of the lesson to be presented in the most accessible ways for students, while the mental component encompasses the teacher's belief system about teaching and learning as well as the teacher's personality.

Thompson (2008) proposes that good language teachers build rapport by caring about their learners, demonstrating patience and respecting the learners. They are well-prepared, able to select appropriate frameworks for their lessons and able to design interesting tasks. The belief that the teacher should be friendly with the students in order to get their commitment to participate in the learning procedure exists in all levels of school. As Foote, Vermette, Wisniewski, Agnello, and Pegano (2000) state, personal relationships are extremely important to students, and it is crucial for the teacher to be close to the students and show interest in their personal emotional world. Teachers might need to consider to what extent they are willing to alter their actions in order to relate to students in appropriate ways because this can help to prevent behavioral problems in the classroom.

In addition, Brosh (1996, cited in Borg, 2006) identifies the desirable characteristics of effective language teachers as perceived by foreign language teachers and students in Israel. Characteristics that emerged overall in the study as those felt to be most desirable included (a) knowledge and command of the target language; (b) ability to recognize, explain and clarify, as well as to arouse and sustain interest and motivation among students; (c) fairness to students by showing neither favoritism nor prejudice; and (d) availability to students.

To conclude, a review of current literature concerning desirable teacher characteristics in foreign language education gives an overview of effective teachers together with the idea that these numerous characteristics could be classified into categories. The researcher decided to employ four main categories in this study. These are English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, organization and communication skills, and socio-affective skills. These categories comprise 33 characteristics.

Research concerning characteristics of effective teachers

Brosh (1996, cited in Park & Lee, 2006) identified characteristics of effective English foreign language teachers as perceived by high school teachers and students in Israel with interviews and a 20-item questionnaire on teacher characteristics. Both groups attributed the highest importance to items regarding command of the target language and teaching comprehensibly, whereas neither the teachers nor the students endorsed items regarding positive attitudes toward native speakers and teaching in the target language. In addition, the teachers gave more weight than students to items about developing motivation and having an appropriate research orientation, whereas the students gave more weight than teachers to items about treating students fairly and making lessons interesting.

Witcher (2003) studied students' perceptions of characteristics of effective college teachers. Participants were 912 undergraduate and graduate students from various academic majors enrolled at a university in a mid-southern state of the United States. In order of endorsement level, a phenomenological analysis revealed the following nine characteristics that students considered to reflect effective college teaching: (1) student-centered (58.88%), (2) knowledgeable about subject matter (44.08%), (3) professional (40.79%), (4) enthusiastic about teaching (29.82%), (5) effective at communication (23.46%), (6) accessible (23.25%), (7) competent at instruction (21.82%), (8) fair and respectful (21.60%), and (9) provider of adequate performance feedback (5.04%). A canonical correlation analysis was undertaken to examine the relationship between the nine themes and eight demographic variables (gender, race, level of study, student teacher status, age, GPA, number of credit hours taken, and number of offspring). The results from the canonical correlation analysis showed that gender, race, age, level of study, pre-service teacher status, and number of offspring were related in some

combination to enthusiasm about teaching, student-centeredness, professionalism, fairness and respectfulness, knowledge of subject matter, and competence of the instructor.

Also, there was another study conducted by Park and Lee (2006), investigating the characteristics of effective English teachers as perceived by 169 teachers and 339 students in high school in Korea, with a self-report questionnaire consisting of three categories: English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, and socio-affective skills. Overall, the teachers endorsed significantly different characteristics than the students in all three categories, with the teachers ranking English proficiency the highest in contrast to the students who ranked pedagogical knowledge the highest. The student subgroups also held different perceptions of effective teaching. High achieving students endorsed different characteristics than low achieving students regarding pedagogical knowledge and socio-affective skills, and male students endorsed different characteristics from female students regarding socio-affective skills. The findings have implications for knowledge-based teacher education for current and prospective English teachers.

In addition, O'Meara (2007) did a study to investigate how 261 Squadron Officer School students perceived the characteristics of effective teachers by ranking each of the 28 characteristics identified on the Teacher Behaviors Checklist (TBC). This was done in order to assess whether there were any statistically significant differences in the total scores of male and female students. The frequency with which students responded to the choices for each item on the five-point Likert-type scale used to score the TBC was assessed. Also, this study investigated how 20 Squadron Officer College instructors perceived the characteristics of effective teachers in order to assess whether there were any statistically significant differences between the students' and instructors' perceptions. The data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and independent samples t-tests. Results

from the statistical analysis indicated that no statistically significant difference existed between the total mean scores on the TBC between male and female students. Moreover, the findings demonstrated that students and instructors believed that the characteristics of effective teachers should be present in teachers to a high degree.

Research methodology

The participants consisted of two different groups. The first group was four hundred undergraduate students enrolled in General English courses (EN 111, EN 112, EN 211 and EN 212) in the first semester of the 2008 academic year at Bangkok University selected using the Stratified Random Sampling technique. The second group consisted of 53 full-time teachers from the Language Institute. The data in this study were gathered by means of a questionnaire which had been designed based on Park and Lee's concepts (2006). There were four categories of characteristics including English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, organization and communication skills, and socio-affective skills shown in the form of a five-point rating scale ranging from "the most important" to "not important at all". The respondents were asked to indicate how important they thought a particular characteristic was in relation to effective teachers. The data were analyzed by using percentage, mean, standard deviation and t-test.

Research results

Table 1. Mean score of students' perceptions on characteristics of effective English language teachers

Category	\bar{X}	S.D.	Level of importance	Rank
1. English proficiency	4.08	0.89	high	4
2. Pedagogical knowledge	4.09	0.50	high	3
3. Organization & communication skills	4.32	0.52	high	1
4. Socio-affective skills	4.24	0.61	high	2
Total	4.17	0.49	high	

Table 1 presents data pertaining to the overall mean score of students' perception on characteristics of effective teachers, which was at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.17$). When considering all categories, it was found that the four categories of characteristics were also endorsed at a high level. Among the four categories, the mean scores could be arranged in order of importance as follows: organization and communication skills ($\bar{x} = 4.32$), socio-affective skills ($\bar{x} = 4.24$), pedagogical knowledge ($\bar{x} = 4.09$), and English proficiency ($\bar{x} = 4.08$).

Table 2. Mean score of teachers' perceptions on characteristics of effective English language teachers

Category	\bar{X}	S.D.	Level of importance	Rank
1. English proficiency	4.66	0.24	very high	1
2. Pedagogical knowledge	4.31	0.47	high	3
3. Organization & communication skills	4.37	0.72	high	2

Category	\bar{X}	S.D.	Level of importance	Rank
4. Socio-affective skills	4.14	0.53	high	4
Total	4.33	0.44	high	

Table 2 shows that the overall mean score of the teachers' perception on characteristics of effective teachers was at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.33$). When considering all categories, English proficiency was endorsed at a very high level, while the other three categories were endorsed at a high level. The four categories could be arranged in order of importance as follows: English proficiency ($\bar{x} = 4.66$), organization and communication skills ($\bar{x} = 4.37$), pedagogical knowledge ($\bar{x} = 4.31$), and socio-affective skills ($\bar{x} = 4.14$).

Table 3. Mean scores of students' and teachers' perceptions on characteristics of effective English language teachers in terms of English proficiency

English proficiency	\bar{X} / S.D. Students	\bar{X} / S.D. Teachers
1. Read, write, speak, and understand spoken English well	4.14/0.91	4.89/0.37
2. Know English vocabulary well	4.14/1.01	4.94/0.23
3. Have good knowledge of English grammar	4.03/1.07	4.90/0.29
4. Possess extensive culture comprehension	3.92/0.95	4.07/0.73
5. Have correct accent and pronunciation	4.15/1.01	4.49/0.50
Total	4.08/0.89	4.66/0.24

Table 3 demonstrates that the students endorsed the characteristics at high level ($\bar{x} = 4.08$), while the teachers endorsed the characteristics at a very high level ($\bar{x} = 4.66$). It was found that the students placed the most importance on “having correct accent and pronunciation” while the teachers considered “knowing English vocabulary well” the most important. The lowest mean scores in this category for both groups were for “possessing extensive culture comprehension” ($\bar{x} = 3.92, 4.07$).

Table 4. Mean scores of students' and teachers' perceptions on characteristics of effective English language teachers in terms of pedagogical knowledge

Pedagogical knowledge	\bar{X} / S.D. Students	\bar{X} / S.D. Teachers
1. Focus on learning outcomes and growth, not content taught	4.23/0.74	4.07/0.67
2. Use various materials including video, audio, and multimedia	3.89/0.83	3.66/0.78
3. Promote communicative language learning through activities & discussion	4.07/0.77	4.17/0.80
4. Create and maintain a good classroom atmosphere	4.32/0.74	4.89/0.37
5. Motivate students by supporting their self-efficacy	4.31/0.75	4.11/0.85
6. Assess what students have learned rationally	4.12/0.77	4.92/0.33
7. Develop students' language skill through working in pairs or groups	4.32/0.78	4.41/0.53

Pedagogical knowledge	\bar{X} / S.D. Students	\bar{X} / S.D. Teachers
8. Let students have some control over the learning process	4.18/0.75	4.09/0.86
9. Encourage the students to learn English outside the classroom	3.44/1.07	3.87/1.29
10. Avoid direct criticism of students when they make errors	3.79/0.98	4.66/0.48
11. Praise students for good ideas or for their effort	4.17/0.80	4.66/0.48
12. Teach subject matter in ways that are accessible to all learners	4.32/0.70	4.28/0.91
13. Provide constant feedback	4.01/0.81	4.23/0.42
Total	4.09/0.50	4.31/0.47

Table 4 presents data pertaining to the overall mean scores of students' and teachers' perceptions in the category of pedagogical knowledge, which were 4.09 and 4.31, respectively. In comparison, the students gave “create and maintain good classroom atmosphere”, “develop students' language skill via working in pairs or groups” and “teach subject matter in ways that are accessible to all learners” the highest rankings equally, whereas the teachers gave “assess what students have learned rationally” the highest ranking.

Table 5. Mean scores of students' and teachers' perceptions on characteristics of effective English language teachers in terms of organization & communication skills

Organization and communication skills	\bar{x} / S.D. Students	\bar{x} / S.D. Teachers
1. Prepare the lesson well	4.35/0.67	4.70/0.46
2. Present the content in a well-organized way	4.26/0.70	4.38/0.90
3. Stress the most important points	4.34/0.71	4.70/0.46
4. Use easy language to aid student understanding	4.31/0.76	4.68/0.51
5. Speak clearly	4.47/0.69	4.40/0.93
6. Vary the speed and tone of voice according to the situation	4.18/0.73	3.60/1.10
7. Use non-verbal behavior to solicit student attention & interest	4.33/0.71	4.11/0.85
Total	4.32/0.52	4.36/0.72

The average mean scores of this category were 4.32 and 4.36. Among the seven items, the item that was rated the most important for the students was speaking clearly ($\bar{x} = 4.47$), followed by preparing the lesson well ($\bar{x} = 4.35$) and using non-verbal behavior to solicit student attention and interest ($\bar{x} = 4.33$). These three items were endorsed at a high level. However, the teachers reported "prepare the lesson well" and "stress most important points" ($\bar{x} = 4.70$) as the most important teacher characteristics, followed by "use easy language to aid student understanding" ($\bar{x} = 4.68$) and "speak clearly" ($\bar{x} = 4.40$).

Table 6. Mean scores of students' and teachers' perceptions on characteristics of effective English language teachers in terms of socio-affective skills

Socio-affective skills	\bar{x} / S.D. Students	\bar{x} / S.D. Teachers
1. Have an interest in students, for example, address individual students by name	4.05/0.82	3.40/1.06
2. Be helpful to students in and outside the classroom	4.03/0.84	3.60/1.06
3. Alleviate students' anxiety in class	4.10/0.90	4.09/0.81
4. Listen to students' points of view	4.25/0.78	4.38/0.56
5. Be approachable and friendly	4.35/0.76	4.66/0.55
6. Be patient	4.27/0.76	4.68/0.55
7. Have a good sense of humor	4.38/0.88	3.66/0.48
8. Treat students fairly and equally	4.47/0.72	4.66/0.55
Total	4.24/0.61	4.14/0.53

The result shown in Table 6 indicates that the students' and teachers' overall endorsement of socio-affective skills was at a high level ($\bar{x} = 4.24$, $\bar{x} = 4.14$). Among the eight items, the students endorsed "treat students fairly and equally" the highest ($\bar{x} = 4.47$), whereas the teachers placed the highest importance on "be patient" ($\bar{x} = 4.68$).

Table 7. Comparison of mean scores of students' perceptions on characteristics of effective English language teachers classified by gender

Characteristics	Variable	n	\bar{X}	S.D.	df	t
1. English proficiency	male	139	4.09	0.91	398	.26
	female	261	4.07	0.88	274.12	
2. Pedagogical knowledge	male	139	4.07	0.51	398	-.65
	female	261	4.10	0.49	271.22	
3. Organization and communication skills	male	139	4.31	0.50	398	-.37
	female	261	4.33	0.53	294.13	
4. Socio-affective skills	male	139	4.22	0.61	398	-.39
	female	261	4.24	0.61	279.81	
Total	male	139	4.16	.48	398	-.39
	female	261	4.18	.50	288.97	

Table 7 shows that female students rated the four categories in order from most to least important as follows: organization and communication skills, socio-affective skills, pedagogical knowledge, and English proficiency. However, male students placed the four categories in the following order: organization and communication skills, socio-affective skills, English proficiency and pedagogical knowledge. In addition, female students rated organization and communication skills, socio-affective skills, and pedagogical knowledge, more highly than male students did, but the category of English proficiency was rated more important by male students than female students.

The overall mean score of female students' perceptions on characteristics of effective teachers was a little bit higher than male students'. The perceptions of both groups were at a high

level ($\bar{x} = 4.18$, $\bar{x} = 4.16$). Therefore, the t-test was employed to examine whether there was a significant difference between the perceptions of male and female students.

Based on the results obtained from the application of the t-test, it was found that there was no statistically significant difference in overall perceptions and in all categories between the two groups (male and female). This means that male and female students were not different in their opinions towards characteristics of effective teachers.

Discussions

Students' perceptions on characteristics of effective English language teachers

From the findings, it can be concluded that Bangkok University students define effective English language teachers as those with good preparation, effective communication ability and a pleasant personality. That the category of organization and communication skills was rated the most important followed by socio-affective skills could be because of the following reasons: 1) The students want their teachers to be proficient at class preparation as this might help them understand things easily. 2) They hope to see their teachers use verbal or non-verbal behaviors to enable them to understand the content easily especially when English is used as a medium of instruction in the classroom. 3) They believe that a teacher's pleasant personality such as not being bad-tempered, being fair, or being friendly can help create a good learning atmosphere. These results can be supported by Thompson (2008) who stated that "good teachers knew the information they were teaching and were confidently able to explain things or answer students' questions when they came up in class." In addition, students want teachers who demonstrate interpersonal rapport with them. For example, friendliness can lead to students' commitment to participate in

the learning procedure. It was also found that male and female students were not significantly different in their opinions about the characteristics of effective teachers. This might be because both groups are equally motivated by a student-centered learning style. All students have to adapt themselves to participate more in the activities provided. This result was in accordance with O'Meara's research which was done to investigate the specific qualities that students perceived contributed to teacher's effectiveness, as the finding indicated that no statistically significant difference existed between male and female students (O'Meara, 2007).

Teachers' perceptions on characteristics of effective English language teachers

In the teachers' opinions, having good English proficiency is very important for the job. This might be because of the nature of the subject matter itself. English is the only subject where effective instruction requires the teacher to use a medium the students do not yet understand. Teachers at Bangkok University believe that having a good command of English enables them to conduct their teaching well, too. This finding is in accordance with Brosh (1996, cited in Borg, 2006) who found that knowledge and command of the target language was the most important characteristic for teachers. Moreover, teachers agreed that the ability to communicate with students and to plan clear and appropriate learning goals permits a sense of confidence, so they place it as the second basic need of good teaching. Overall, the characteristics of effective teachers were defined differently by students and teachers. The students perceived organization and communication skills as the most important characteristic, while the teachers perceived English language proficiency as the most important characteristic.

Bio data

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