

STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF GOOD ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHERS

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Abstract

An effective English language teacher could motivate the students to learn the language and affect their attitudes towards the language in a positive way. This study investigated the criteria of good English language teachers in secondary schools as perceived by 90 PPISMP June 2018 intake foundation students from Institute of Teacher Education, Islamic Education Campus, Bangi, Selangor (IPG KPI). Data were collected by means of a focus group interviews and a questionnaire that comprises of two constructs: 17 character traits items and 18 teaching techniques items. The quantitative data was analysed using percentage to obtain descriptive information based on the questionnaire. The findings show the participants perceived character traits as the 10 most important criteria. The results can serve as a basis for teachers to improve their skills or qualities and may provide a framework to help teachers to increase their teaching efficiency.

Key words: good teacher, English language teachers, character traits, teaching techniques, students' perceptions

Abstrak

Guru yang berkesan adalah guru yang dapat memberi motivasi kepada pelajar untuk mempelajari subjek Bahasa Inggeris dan mengubah sikap pelajar menjadi lebih positif terhadap matapelajaran tersebut. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenalpasti persepsi 90 pelajar persediaan Ambilan Jun 2018, Institut Pendidikan Guru, Kampus Pendidikan Islam (IPGKPI) terhadap kriteria guru Bahasa Inggeris yang baik di sekolah menengah. Data dikumpul melalui soalan temubual dan soal selidik yang mengandungi dua konstruk: 17 item sifat guru dan 18 item teknik pengajaran. Data kuantitatif soal selidik dianalisa menggunakan peratus untuk mendapat maklumat deskriptif. Secara keseluruhannya, hasil kajian menunjukkan responden cenderung memilih sifat guru sebagai sepuluh kriteria terpenting untuk menjadi seorang guru Bahasa Inggeris yang baik. Dapatan ini dapat digunakan sebagai panduan untuk guru meningkatkan kualiti sifat guru dan kemahiran mengajar.

Kata Kunci: guru yang baik, Guru Bahasa Inggeris, ciri-ciri guru, teknik pengajaran, persepsi pelajar

It is widely acknowledged that the most effective pathway to improve student learning outcomes is the quality of teaching, especially teachers' ability to motivate and facilitate such learning. According to Williams and Burden (1997) learner motivation is seen as one of the most powerful influences on learning and in the case of a foreign or second language, a fundamental factor in language achievement.

An effective English language teacher should have numerous essential characteristics that increase students' motivation for language learning and affect their attitudes towards the language and learning it in a positive way. As Koç (2013) suggests, effective teachers are the ones who motivate students. Similarly, Lamb and Wedell (2013) believe that, consistency of language learning is what a good teacher desires and language learners need motivation in order to ensure this consistency. According to these scholars (Lamb & Wedell, 2013), teacher is one

of the most significant motivational sources in language learning process, so they name this motivational source as ‘inspiration’.

Harmer (2009) explains language teachers’ role in motivating students in language classes by entitling them as ‘motivation angels’ and he believes that teachers should build the basis of extrinsic motivation that students need. As Harmer (2007a) explains, being an effective teacher may or may not be an inborn capability; effective teachers, either born or made, learn the craft of teaching progressively. According to Hadfield and Hadfield (2008), what makes someone a good teacher is trying to address his or her students’ needs and wants.

In the eyes of students, a good teacher should have some qualities, such as passion, dedication, understanding and commitment to teaching. What about the qualities of being a good language teacher? As a language teacher, it is essential to know what is defined as a good English teacher. A good teacher is more than just an educator, the characteristics that make a teacher good are complex and extensive.

Defining “good” teachers has become the subject of many research and this idea is still debatable among researchers since the characteristics or specific traits which constitute effective teachers may very difficult to explain and thus, vary among countries, contexts, and across disciplines. Zhang & Watkins (2007) as in Al-Mahrooqi et al (2015) said that these differences may be influenced by a variety of factors including culture, gender, subject area, school level, and the curriculum used. However, some basic criteria or characteristics have been identified from their findings. In fact, English language teachers are indeed different from teachers of other subjects in some ways.

This present study aims to gain insight into the concept of the features of good English Language teachers according to secondary school students . The results of the study will provide teachers with the thoughts of what students expect from them as teachers and will help the English language teachers in meeting the expectations of the students, which is likely to lead to a more effective language teaching. This research is important to be conducted because English in Malaysia is taught as second language; it needs good English teachers who have good characteristics with respect to technical knowledge, pedagogical skills, personal qualities and interpersonal skills.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

According to Malaysia Blueprint 2013 - 2025, the quality of teacher is the most significant in determining the students’ outcomes. Seminal research conducted in the state of Tennessee, USA in the mid-1990s showed that high-performing teachers can improve student achievement by up to 50 percentile points over a three-year period, relative to low-performing teachers.

In 2011, researchers from the Higher Education Leadership Academy or *Akademi Kepimpinan Pengajian Tinggi* (AKEPT) at the Ministry of Higher Education (MoHE) observed 125 lessons in 41 schools across Malaysia. They found that 12% of lessons were delivered at a high standard, utilising many best-practice pedagogies and 38% met satisfactory standards. However, 50% of the lessons were observed to be delivered unsatisfactorily. Lessons did not sufficiently engage students, relying on a more passive lecture format of content delivery by the teacher (Malaysia Education Blueprint).

Williams and Burden’s (1997) social constructivist model identified four key factors which influence the learning process – *teachers, learners, tasks, and context*. They note that these factors do not exist in isolation but are in a dynamic interaction. A teacher’s perception about teaching and learning will often be reflected in the tasks they select. Learners will then interpret these tasks in the manner which will be most meaningful to them. When teachers and learners interact, their values, perceptions and attitudes will be reflected. The manner in which teachers behave in classrooms will reflect their perceptions and values. The way in which

learners react to these behaviors will reflect their individual character and the feelings that the teacher conveys to them.

Investigating the characteristics of a good English language teacher has been one of the popular topics in English language field. Researchers have attempted to find out the characteristics of good English language teachers, and such studies have been conducted in different contexts with different participants. The results of these studies show that, although there are some common characteristics of good English language teachers, there could be different perceptions regarding who a good English language teacher is.

The perceptions about a good English language teacher have been varied among the language learners and the teachers themselves. However, it is important to find out what kind of a good English language teacher based on learners' perceptions in order to discover what they believe and what they expect from their English teachers when they are learning the language.

Students are not always willing or able to communicate their opinions freely to their teachers. This sometimes creates situations where teachers remain oblivious to the fact that some of their teaching behaviours or practices are not favoured by their students. (Barnes, 2013). Therefore this research is important to give insight on what criteria students perceived that good English language teachers in Malaysian secondary schools should have.

OBJECTIVES

This study investigated what IPG KPI foundation students perceived as the most and least important criteria of good English language teachers in secondary schools and their reasons for choosing the particular criteria.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The findings of this study answered the following research questions:

1. What do students perceive as the most important criteria of good English language teachers?
2. What do students perceive as the least important criteria of good English Language teachers?
3. What are their reasons for choosing these particular criteria?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is divided into two parts. Firstly, the characteristics of an effective English language teachers are described. Next, the studies related to effective English language teachers are reviewed.

Effective English Language Teachers

It is undeniable that the role of the English language teacher in English language teaching and learning is very important in determining the success of English language teaching. The experts of the English language teaching field and researchers have been continually discussing the characteristics of an effective English language teacher. One of the characteristics is to be able to motivate students to learn the language and affect their attitudes towards the language in a positive way. In order to be able to motivate students, teachers should have numerous essential characteristics that could build the basis of motivation that students need (Lamb & Wedell, in Seldon Yagcioglu (2016) who believes that teachers should play different roles effectively depending on the rapport they establish with their students by addressing his or her students' needs and wants. In addition, an effective teacher will always create an atmosphere that is based

on respect, fairness, and trust through a good relation with his or her students. By creating good relationship and trust, the students will feel motivated to learn (Sowden ,2012).

According to Miller (2012), there are ten main characteristics of an effective English language teacher. The first characteristic is an effective teacher is someone who is passionate in teaching. Students can easily see through a teacher who is indifferent. The second characteristic is ‘creative’ and able to vary the pedagogical method. The third characteristic mentioned is “humour”. A teacher should use “humor” frequently in class in order to create an easy going environment. Research has consistently shown that good teachers have a sense of humor, and that they are able to use humor as part of their teaching methods. Humor, used properly, can be a powerful addition to any lesson.

The fourth characteristic is to be able to use challenging activities in the classroom and the fifth characteristic is to be able to support and give encouragement to the students especially when they experiences difficulties. The sixth characteristic that Miller (2012) mentions is a teacher should show interest in student’s background and hobbies. The seventh characteristic is able to master grammar and the eight characteristic is able to spend time with the students outside the classroom. The ninth characteristic is fair and respectful towards the students regardless the gender. The last characteristic mentioned is practicality and able to leave private matters outside the classroom.

Related studies

Many studies have focused on the characteristics of an effective English language teacher with different methods and different participants such as studies by Nghia (2015), Han (2016), Tam Thi Thanh Vo (2012), Sowden (2012) and Miller (2012).

A research done by Nghia (2015) in East Asia, revealed that Vietnamese students expected their English teachers to be competent in language ability, to use appropriate teaching methods and socio-affective skills, and to be dedicated and friendly. On the other hand, low achievers desired teachers to be fair and responsive to their abilities in a relaxed atmosphere. The same results were discovered by Han (2016) in his study which revealed the perceptions of Korean high school students in a suburban area. In her study, the students viewed interaction and social skills as the most important aspects.

According to Tam Thi Thanh Vo (2012), students perceive an effective teacher as someone who have good rapport with the students. Besides that, an effective teacher is someone who have the ability to give clear explanations regardless of the subject or grade level. “Patient” is another character traits that students expect from a good teacher. Furthermore, a good teacher is willing to repeat the content taught. This is because the students might not comprehend much of what they hear if the teachers talk too fast or offer little repetition.

Sowden (2012) in his research entitled “Culture and the Good Teacher in the English language classroom” discovered that a good teacher should have good knowledge of the English language. Some of the respondents even mention that they prefer teachers speaking with a British or American accent since they are very familiar with these accents. This means, having knowledge of a broad range of content is essential to convey the information in meaningful ways to the students. In addition, research has consistently shown that being humorous and able to use humour as part of the teaching method is one of the character traits of a good teachers. According to Miller (2012), humour that is used properly, can be a powerful addition to any lesson.

Unlike other researches which had been carried out, this research looked at perceptions of students who had just completed their secondary education and who are going to be future English Language teachers. It is hoped that these perceptions will make them more aware of the characteristics that they should or should not have when they become teachers. Therefore,

the result of this research is not only important for in-service teachers, but also for the respondents of the research to shape them to be better teachers in the future.

In conclusion, teacher's persona has a huge impact on the students. A large body of researches show that if a teacher is warm, caring, knowledgeable and have a sense of humour, the students will learn more. Students need to feel that they are being heard so that they do not feel neglected or misunderstood. This in a way will motivate them to study.

METHODOLOGY

The study focused on quantitative research method which was a cross-sectional survey. According to Fraenken and Wallen (2006), cross-sectional survey allowed the researcher to answer research questions one and two. This method of design is particularly relevant for the researcher to get general overview of the respondents' perceptions on the top 10 most important and 5 least important criteria of a good English language teacher. The questionnaire consisted of 34 items which comprised of 2 sections:

Section A: Teacher's Character Traits (17 items)

Section B: Teacher's Teaching Techniques (18 items)

These questionnaire items are not separated according to specific sections in order to minimise the influence on students' perceptions. In addition, an interview was conducted on several selected respondents chosen at random from different classes to identify the reasons for choosing those particular criteria.

Respondents of The Study

The respondents of the study were 90 PPISMP June 2018 intake foundation students from Institute of Teacher Education, Islamic Education Campus, Bangi, Selangor who were in their first semester. They were 71 females and 19 males and their age were between 18 to 19 years old from five different classes. The students came from four different types of schools: day schools (SMK), high performance schools, religious schools (SMK) and boarding schools from all the states in Malaysia except Melaka.

Data Gathering Method

A total of 90 Questionnaires were given to the respondents where they had to choose the top 10 most important criteria a good language teacher should have. The quantitative data was analysed using percentage to obtain descriptive information based on the questionnaire. According to Jackson (2006), descriptive statistics are numerical measures which describes a distribution by giving vital information on the central tendency of the distribution as well as the width and shape distribution. Open ended interview was also carried out to 10 selected respondents at random to identify the reasons for choosing those particular criteria.

FINDINGS

This section presents an analysis of data based on the findings from two sources namely questionnaire and interviews gathered from June 2018 intake foundation students from Institute of Teacher Education Islamic Education Campus. Findings from the questionnaires display the results of top 10 most important criteria and 5 least important criteria of good English Language teachers.

Table 1

Ten most important Criteria of Good English Language Teachers.

No	A good English language teacher should:		%
1	have a sense of humour	58/90	64.4%
2	create a fun and relaxed learning environment	56/90	62.2%
3	use creative teaching techniques	54/90	60.0%
4	know his students very well	48/90	53.3%
5	be patient	47/90	52.2%
6	be friendly to students	46/90	51.1%
7	be open minded	44/90	48.9%
8	be able to give explanation clearly	40/90	44.4%
9	be able to motivate students	39/90	43.3%
10	be kind to students	37/90	41.1%

Table 1 displays the respondents' perceptions on 10 most important criteria of good English Language teachers. The respondents perceived having a sense of humour in the classroom as the most important criteria of good English language teachers (64.4%) followed by creating fun and relaxed learning environment" (62.2%), using creative teaching techniques (60%), knowing the students very well (53.3%) and being patient with students (52.2%). Next criteria is being friendly with students (51.1%) followed by being an open minded teacher (48.9%), able to give clear explanation (44%), able to motivate students (43.3%) and be kind to students (41.1%) as their tenth criteria. The overall result shows, out of the ten criteria chosen, 7 criteria fall under teachers' character traits and 3 are from teachers' teaching techniques. Therefore, the result illustrates that students perceived the most important criteria that English teachers should have is teachers' character traits compared to their teaching techniques.

Analysis of the interviews illustrated the reasons of the top ten chosen criteria of good English language teachers. As stated by the respondents, teachers with a sense of humour will set a more relaxed environment and make students interested to learn. This is because students will not feel bored with the lessons especially when teachers start the lesson with a joke. The class will also be more cheerful. Besides using humour in class, the respondents also claimed that teachers should always use a variety of teaching aids to create a fun and relaxed learning environment and do not depend on text books alone. Teachers can use technology, multimedia and even social media to create interesting activities in class. Moreover, students nowadays are

more into technology based learning. Furthermore, teachers should use creative teaching techniques by having interesting activities such as language games, role-play, quizzes to attract students' attention. Teachers can also have their teaching and learning activities outside the classroom.

Good teachers need to know the students well in terms of academic achievement and social background so that suitable help could be given to them. In other words, good teachers are always aware of their students' strengths and weaknesses. This will show that the teachers are concerned about the students. In addition, good teachers are patient teachers who are willing to repeat and give explanation in the classroom to ensure students understand the lessons. The respondents stated that it is very hard for them to approach a teacher for extra help if they think the teacher will most likely lose his temper. Moreover, good teachers are friendly teachers. Students feel teachers can be strict in the classroom, but friendly and approachable outside the classroom. This will build a rapport between teacher and student in the classroom. By being friendly and easy to approach, students will feel motivated and interested to join English language activities. Finally, teachers too should be good motivators by giving praises to students for their achievement in the classroom as this will make students feel motivated to try again. In conclusion, it is clear that teachers' character traits affect students' attitudes towards language learning in a positive way.

Table 2

Five least important criteria of good English language teachers.

No	A good English language teacher should:		%
1	have a native like accent	2/90	2.2%
2	follow the text book	4/90	4.4%
3	give homework to students	7/90	7.8%
4	not using Bahasa Malaysia in class	7/90	7.8%
5	set activities which require students to work individually	7/90	7.8%

Table 2 indicates the least 5 important criteria of good English language teachers chosen by all the respondents. The lowest criteria chosen by students is English language teachers should be able to speak with native accent, only two out of ninety respondents (2.2%) chose that criteria. This is because, although the accent is nice to listen to, it is difficult for them to understand especially if the teacher talks too fast. According to them, it is only suitable for people who are fluent in the language. Next, only four respondents (4.4%) prefer teachers to use and follow the text book because they said sometimes the content of the text book is not interesting and the activities are repetitive. In addition, very few students, seven out of ninety respondents (7.8%) agree with teachers giving homework and completing the work individually. The overall results show, out of the five criteria chosen, 4 criteria fall under teachers' teaching techniques and 1 is from teachers' character traits. This results support the findings from the first research question which shows students perceived teachers' character traits are more important than teachers' teaching techniques.

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATION

In this section, the results of the present study are discussed under the research questions by referring to the relevant studies in the literature.

The results of the study indicate that out of the ten criteria chosen, 7 criteria fall under teachers' character traits (have a sense of humour, know students very well, patient, friendly to students, open minded, able to motivate students and kind to students) and 3 are from teachers' teaching techniques (able to give explanation clearly, use creative teaching techniques and create a fun and relaxed learning environment) . This shows that respondents perceived the most important criteria that English teachers should have is teachers' character traits compared to their teaching techniques. As stated by the respondents, teachers with a sense of humour will set a more relaxed environment. In addition, good teachers are patient teachers who are willing to repeat and give explanation in the classroom to ensure students understand the lessons.

Furthermore, respondents feel teachers can be strict in the classroom, but friendly and approachable outside the classroom in order to build a rapport between teacher and student in the classroom. By being friendly and easy to approach, students will feel motivated and interested to join English language activities. Finally, teachers who always praises their students for their achievement in the classroom will make students feel motivated to try again. These resonated with findings on the characteristics of an effective English language teacher by Tam Thi Thanh Vo (2012), Sowden (2012) and Miller (2012).

On the contrary, out of the five criteria chosen, 4 criteria fall under teachers' teaching techniques (follow the text book, give homework to students, not using Bahasa Malaysia in class and set activities which require students to work individually) and 1 is from teachers' character traits (have a native like accent). The lowest criteria chosen by respondents is English language teachers should be able to speak with native accent. According to the respondents, it is difficult to understand teachers who speak with native accent. The second lowest criteria is related to the use of text book in classroom. The respondents stated that the content of the textbook is not interesting and the activities are repetitive. In conclusion, respondents perceived the most important criteria that English teachers should have is teachers' character traits compared to their teaching techniques. According to research done by Nghia (2015) and Han (2016), Vietnamese students expected their English teachers to have socio-affective skills, and to be dedicated as well as friendly. Able to be fair and responsive to the students would create a relaxed atmosphere in the classroom. In other words, the students viewed interaction and social skills as the most important aspects.

The findings of the present study may provide some implications for pedagogy and further research. This study can raise the awareness of the students and teachers regarding good English language teachers and this may get them to search for the ways of being better English language teachers. In addition, there is a need to understand students' perceptions of good English language teachers as a valuable springboard to motivate the students to learn the language and affect their attitudes towards the language in a positive way. Besides, this study recommended the need to carry out research on regular basis so English language teachers would be able to teach more effectively. Further, teacher would move forward with a common understanding about the best practices in accordance with teachers' experiences and knowledge according to the beliefs and needs of students.

The study had a few limitations as it lacked the opportunity to conduct a larger scale study in order to cover Institute of Teacher Education in Malaysia. The findings of this study cannot be generalized to other students and contexts, as the students involved in this study are being trained to become future teachers. Therefore, further studies need to be done with English and non-English major students who learn English as compulsory school subject in school to determine the way they perceive the notion of good English language teachers using different research instruments.

CONCLUSION

Students are eager to offer their thoughts and comments on their perceptions on the criteria of good teachers as they might have many worthwhile insights on those perceptions. Their perceptions of those criteria appear to be congruent with what the literature is saying. These students insights provide valuable and helpful information for beginning and experienced teachers as they might find it helpful to their classroom practice and to their overall role as a teacher to reflect on the various behaviors they exhibit and the various strategies they utilize on a daily basis.

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