

An Effective English Language Teacher: Teachers' and Students' Views

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Abstract

Studies have various definitions of an effective English language teacher with many characteristics. The study aims to figure out students' and teachers' views on the characteristics of an effective English language teacher in a Vietnamese context. The study employs the Vietnam English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF) to evaluate a Vietnamese teacher of English language presented in the National Foreign Language Project 2020 by Ministry of Education and Training (MOET), which displays their characteristics of *knowledge of English language and curriculum, knowledge of language teaching, knowledge of language learners, professional attitudes and values in language teaching, and practice and context of language teaching*. The participants were 20 teachers of English and 20 English-majored students at a university in Vietnam. A structured interview was the primary method to examine teachers' and students' views, and then qualitatively coded transcripts were analysed by themes (**Braun & Clarke, 2006**). The results showed that all participants had strong and different views and agreed that an effective English language teacher should employ all characteristics as *knowledge of English language and curriculum* was most remarkable. The study is a foundation for language education administrators, educators and policy makers to evaluate a language teacher as well as requirements to select an effective English language teacher in an institution.

Keywords: effective English language teachers, characteristics, views

1. Introduction

In order to enhance the quality of language learning and teaching, effective teachers play a major role in improving the educational system of a country. Moreover, they have had a strong influence on learners' academic achievements and the quality of teaching has significantly affected learners' outcomes (**Campbell, Kyriakides, Muijse & Robinson, 2004**). The relationship between students and teachers in language learning is also considerable especially in the settings in which the main source of language input to students is normally given by language teachers (**Shishavan & Shadeghi, 2009**).

Although effective teachers may share some common characteristics, a language teacher is different from teachers of other subjects (**Borg, 2006**). However, in Asian cultures, the role of teachers is crucial especially in formal classroom settings in spite of some changes in language teaching underlying communicative approaches, in which students are considered centre-oriented. Therefore, students' views are vital in identifying an effective language teacher because they are critical and discerning

audiences; and teachers who can respond to students' personalities, attitudes, needs and backgrounds are good teachers (**Riddell, 2014**).

In Vietnam, students do not have a strong voice in identifying how effectively their English language teachers perform in the classroom. To evaluate a language teacher, standardized criteria should be based on. Although Vietnam Ministry of Education and Training (MOET) has yearly competitions to select excellent language teachers, it is not adequate to evaluate how effective a language teacher is.

2. Literature Review

2.1 An effective teacher

In learning and teaching, the term *effective* has been defined by a number of researchers. Defining *effective teachers* is not easy because there are different definitions drawn out from different people. **Campbell, Kyriakides, Muijs, & Robinson (2004)** presented five propositions, regarding effective teaching, which effective teachers should have. They are considered as planning, teacher-student interaction, teaching skills, lesson design, and the energy and enthusiasm of the teacher. It is considered essential when these five propositions are meaningfully unified.

The distinctions between an effective teacher and teachers of other subjects is the teacher's ability to share information with students about the lessons and related knowledge that helps students understand and apply it in practice (**Stephens & Crawley, 1994**).

In addition, an effective teacher can mean a teacher who always conducts successful classes and receives good evaluations from colleagues, supervisors, and administrators (**Stronge, 2018**). However, in terms of teaching, an effective teacher is broadly identified as a person who provides students with information as a competent instructor, focusing on knowledge and skill transfer. (**Beishuizen et al., 2010**)

Similarly, **Kyriakides, Campbell, and Christofidou (2002)** figured out that effective teachers need to be aware of instruction quality, organize and manage the classroom, make use of use instructional time, structure teaching materials, get students involved in classroom activities, create an interesting classroom atmosphere, and have enough subject knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, teaching beliefs, and teachers' self-efficacy.

2.2 Characteristics of an effective teacher

What makes a teacher effective has been studied over a long period of time by educators and administrators. In a previous study, an effective teacher should have the following 10 characteristics *1) monitoring students' work, checking progress, and giving feedback, 2) structuring lessons and communicating expectations through objectives, 3) pacing instruction rapidly, 4) asking questions requiring analysis, synthesis, and evaluation, 5) providing waiting time for answers, 6) communicating high expectations, 7) providing a safe and orderly classroom, 8) fostering a convivial atmosphere, 9) making the best motivational use of tests and grades, and 10) providing feedback in positive corrective ways* (**Witcher et al., 2001**).

Koutsoulis (2003) examined three categories of characteristics that might define effective teachers as human characteristics such as the ability to show their understanding to their students and their

friendliness; communication characteristics such as the ability to communicate with students and enhance interactions to maintain teacher-student relations; and teaching and production characteristics such as planning lessons to make them interesting as well as to help students learn better.

Apart from good teaching methodologies that teachers should adopt, personal traits are also vital which make successful learning as being well-planned, creative and patient with the learners they are working (Wichadee & Orawiwatnakul, 2012).

2.3 Characteristics of an effective English language teacher

As found in the studies of foreign language teacher education, researchers have discussed the characteristics of effective language teachers in order to improve the quality of teachers (Freeman & Johnson, 1998). The discussion has an emphasis on teacher's knowledge which are fallen into two categories: subject-matter knowledge and pedagogical knowledge.

Borg (2006) stated some common characteristics of effective English language teachers which emerged to be suitable to teaching and learning environment stated in the study. These include 1) *knowledge and command of the target language*, 2) *ability to recognize, explain and clarify, as well as to arouse and sustain interest and motivation among students*, 3) *fairness to students by showing neither favouritism nor prejudice*, and 4) *availability to students*.

In addition, Park and Lee (2006) figured out the characteristics of effective English teachers when teachers and students were asked in Korea, which presented as 1) *English proficiency*, 2) *pedagogical knowledge*, and 3) *socio-affective skills*. Indeed, *language proficiency has been considered essential to foreign language teaching* (Richards et al., 2013).

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The Vietnam English Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF) (2012) is also developed from several international foreign language teacher standards documents including the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) (2001), the ACTFL Program Standards for the Preparation of Foreign Language Teachers (2013), TESOL/NCATE Teacher Education Standards (2010), the European Portfolio of Student Teachers of Languages (2007).

It is obvious that the standardized framework is appropriate in a Vietnamese educational setting, as a guide to evaluate the competency of an English language teacher; in other words, it is to find out the characteristics of an effective English language teacher in current Vietnamese educational context. The ETCF falls into 5 domains, presented in National Foreign Languages 2020 Project as 1) *knowledge of English language and curriculum*, 2) *knowledge of language teaching*, 3) *knowledge of language learners*, 4) *professional attitudes and values in language teaching*, and 5) *practice and context of language teaching*.

3. Method

3.1 Research questions

1. To what extent do you think an effective English language teacher should have knowledge of English language and curriculum?

2. Should an effective English language teacher have knowledge of English language teaching methodologies?
3. Is it necessary to gain knowledge of language learners in order to teach English language well?
4. How do teachers' professional attitudes and values in language teaching affect an effective English language teacher?
5. How important is it for an effective English language teacher to understand the context in which English is being taught and to connect language learning to real uses of English in Vietnam?

3.2 Research design

A qualitative research design was used to figure out teachers' and students' views on the characteristics of an effective English language teacher. A structured interview was employed with a purposive sampling technique which helps to identify only emerging individuals or groups who have necessary knowledge and experience (Flick, 2009).

3.3 Participants

The number of participants was 20 teachers of English (10-20 years of teaching experience) and 20 English-majored students (juniors and seniors) in a public university in Vietnam, aged 18-50.

3.4 Research instruments

The participants were joined in a structured interview with four major questions following the ETCF (2012). A series of sub-questions were also used to gain more insights into teachers' and students' views on the characteristics of an effective English teacher. Open-ended questions were sent to the participants on Google Docs where the answers were recorded and stored with a password. The answers could be either English or Vietnamese. The purpose of a structured interview was to identify influential characteristics of an effective English language teacher and compare teachers' and students' views in systematic way. Each interview took around 20 minutes to complete.

4. Results

Question 1: To what extent do you think an effective English language teacher should have knowledge of English language and curriculum?

Knowledge of English language

The interview revealed that all interviewees (100%) agreed that it was the most important factor for an effective English language teacher to obtain knowledge of English language well in order to succeed in their teaching career.

"I guess it is prior to have good knowledge of the English language because they can teach English skills better and easier." (Student B)

"It is of course the most important because it is a requirement for every teacher to know well about English and have the ability to use it frequently." (Teacher D)

When the interviewees were asked about the level of English language proficiency that an effective English language teacher should obtain, all of the interviewees (100%) came to an agreement that it should be a high level of English language proficiency (upper-intermediate or advanced). In fact, teachers mentioned the level of language proficiency should be a C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency or Advanced) for teachers according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and English Language Teacher Competency Framework (ETCF) presented in the National Foreign Language 2020 Project by Ministry of Education and Training (MOET). This level of proficiency has been currently considered as a standard for all Vietnamese teachers of English to achieve. Therefore, they cared much about the framework.

“Teachers must have a high level of English language at least C1 for high school teachers, adequate knowledge to teach English. It is a requirement for all language teachers in Vietnam. As indicated by MOET, it is a means to maintain language proficiency for teachers at work apart from their methodological competence.”
(Teacher I)

However, 15 students (75%) did not have much information about the CEFR when they were asked, only few students heard about the CEFR. Therefore, it would be a good idea to update the information about CEFR and ETCF for students who have been training to become an English language teacher.

“I don't know clearly about what the CEFR is, but I think my teachers should be very proficient. They must use English very well before they become a teacher of English.”
(Student M)

Knowledge of English curriculum

Moreover, knowledge of the curriculum also played a major role as a guideline for an English language teacher to follow. The reason for this was shared by 13 teachers (65%) in order to introduce the importance of the curriculum to English language teaching.

“The language curriculum will define and orient the content, methods, and classroom activities used in teaching practices.” (Teacher B)

However, students did not share the same opinions with teachers, all students (100%) supported that teachers strictly followed the curriculum in a mechanical way.

“They follow the curriculum and textbook as a guideline because they are not allowed to get out of the curriculum. Teachers need to use textbooks that are governed to be used officially and follow the content of what the national curriculum asks teachers to teach. It is considered the rule, but very mechanical!” (Student K)

Question 2: Should an effective English language teacher have knowledge of English language teaching methodologies?

Teaching methods

The results showed that 90% of the interviewees highly supported this domain and significantly appreciated teaching methodologies in English language teaching because it was important to apply

an appropriate teaching approach in order to achieve the goals of English language learning and teaching.

“It is absolutely important because teachers have to choose a good teaching approach like Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) or Task-based Learning (TBL) to help students communicate in English better.” (Teacher F)

“Because an effective teacher should be first evaluated by knowledge of teaching methodology. A successful classroom can be made from the teaching method that the teacher applies in his/her class to get students interested in their lessons.” (Student G)

Most students (85%) did not know which teaching method or approach that their teachers were applying in class or they did not even care about if the methods or approaches were modern. All they concerned was the effectiveness and excitement their teachers brought to their classrooms. While all teachers (100%) knew exactly the methods or approaches they should use to teach.

“I want my class to becoming interesting and fun with many activities, and I don’t care about the name of method my teachers are using.” (Student N)

“In order to have a good lesson, I combine some methods or approaches in one lesson to make it become successful. CLT is commonly used in many of my class, but sometimes Grammar-Translation Method is more helpful.” (Teacher H)

Lesson Planning

All interviewees (100%) agreed that teachers should have a good lesson plan before class. Students expected their teachers to provide them with interesting and new things rather than some repeated activities.

“A good lesson plan can make them easier to teach because they will know what to teach. More activities can be used flexibly to make class interesting. Assignments should be given with different tasks or exercises to measure students’ ability. (Teacher D)

“I always want to study something with more fun and excitement. Some old way of doing exercises or assignments make me bored in class.” (Student H)

Question 3: Is it necessary to gain knowledge of language learners in order to teach English language well?

Learning styles and skills

The results revealed that all teachers (100%) supported that an effective English teacher should know clearly about their learners regarding learning styles and skills so that teachers could deal with some problems since students were from different backgrounds.

“Teachers can understand what students like to learn. Moreover, not all students are the same, they have different characteristics. Some like English, but others hate it, so

teachers need to understand students well to encourage them in learning English.”
(Teacher O)

However, four students (20%) stated that they could learn alone better, but their teachers always assigned them to work in pairs or groups.

“My teachers should know what level I am in, and sometimes I don't want to work in groups. I think I work better individually. When I need help, I will ask my friends or teachers.” (Student H)

Students' emotions

From teachers' views, 15 out of 20 (75%) indicated that an effective English language teacher should understand how students feel to avoid hurting students' feelings and to encourage their students make progress.

“I understand that students are young, so they need care from adults, especially teachers are as their parents to guide them and support students' mental health. When a student fails or has a problem, it might affect their learning performance, so encouragement and caring can help. Also, teachers shouldn't hurt students' feelings in any way.” (Teacher F)

In addition, 90% of the students expected their teachers to understand students and share things to help them.

“If teachers can get along well with students and students feel their teachers are close to them and understand them, so they feel relaxed when they learn English. If they feel like English and relaxed in learning, they can learn better, so teachers can encourage them by sharing something in study as a friend, a brother or sister, or even a parent.”
(Student C)

Question 4: How do teachers' professional attitudes and values in language teaching affect an effective English language teacher?

The results showed that 80% of the interviewees had the same ideas that an effective English language teacher should have professional attitudes and values in teaching English. The reasons were described that teachers should be a good model in both teaching skills and behaviours or help students with some problems in learning in a nice way and treat students equally.

“It's necessary to be professional in teaching English and making a teacher become an ideal model of in both school and society.” (Teacher G)

“I feel that teachers should be fair and close to their students in learning English, and solve teaching problems very nicely and gently.” (Student L)

Question 5: How important is it for an effective English language teacher to understand the context in which English is being taught and to connect language learning to real uses of English in Vietnam?

A majority of the interviewees (70%) supported that teachers should know their teaching context very well so that they could use proper teaching methodologies to suit the objectives of the course in an institution where English was being taught.

“A new teaching method that is successful in a country may not be successful when it is applied in Vietnamese context. Cultures and the setting may affect the way Vietnamese students learn English and Vietnamese teachers teach English.” (Teacher Q)

However, 50% of students did not care about the way their teachers connected learning English to the real uses of English in their country.

“It was not necessary to connect my learning beyond different countries. I wish my teachers could help me more with language proficiency then we can explore the world later. Honestly, I don’t learn English to communicate with Vietnamese people.” (Student K)

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The findings of this study show that teachers and students had strong views on the characteristics of an effective English language teacher. They all supported five domains 1) knowledge of English language and curriculum, 2) knowledge of language teaching, 3) knowledge of language learners, 4) professional attitudes and values in language teaching, and 5) practice and context of language teaching as cited in the ETCF (2012), National Foreign Language Project 2020 in Vietnam, which are standardized criteria to evaluate a Vietnamese teacher of English.

For the first domain, both teachers and students cared about the English level of proficiency that a teacher should at least get – C1 (according to CEFR). The dominant factor is confirmed by the MOET and the primary requirement for an English language teacher. If an English language teacher does not meet this requirement, they have to stop and practice until they get the required level.

Teachers following the second domain focused much on appropriate teaching methods or approaches to lead a successful English language class, which some commonly used methods as CLT or TBL have been applying in most situations. However, students did not notice which teaching methodologies their teachers used because they expected their teachers to motivate them with exciting activities.

Thirdly, it is undeniable that an effective English language teacher is a person who understands their students’ backgrounds, feelings and emotions in order to suitably assist their students in both learning process and other circumstances. Students set a high expectation for their teachers to know what kind of students and fill the generation gap since students wanted to get closer to their teachers as a friend or a family member.

The fourth domain is to trigger teacher professionalism since teachers wanted to become professional in teaching English language as well as have values for their teaching career. Meanwhile, students also evaluated their teachers through how well they behaved with their profession and students.

The last domain focuses on teaching English language in a Vietnamese context in which teachers supported that they noticed the importance of understanding what they had to teach in their specific

context and of connection students' learning English to the real uses in Vietnam. However, many students paid more attention to how their teachers helped them to achieve English language proficiency rather than other things beyond their country.

In summary, the above-mentioned characteristics of an English language teacher are essential to help identify an effective teacher. Although teachers and students have several different views on the criteria that the MOET used to evaluate a Vietnamese teacher of English, teachers should gain insights into these characteristics to better themselves in their profession.

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