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Characteristics of effective EFL instructors

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Abstract

Shifts from traditional teacher-centered approaches to more student-centered ones, have led students to express their views regarding the course curricula and instructors. However, students’ perceptions have often been neglected in conservative countries like Iran. The purpose of the current research was to identify the main features which characterize an effective EFL instructor according to language students. A 58-item questionnaire was administered to language learners. The results contain significant information regarding the characteristics of a successful instructor in an EFL context.

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Keywords: EFL instructors; student perspective; learner centered

1. Introduction

With the spread of globalization, language learning is gaining more and more prominence daily. As the movement from traditional methods of education to modern methods takes place, developing countries like Iran find themselves trapped between these two extremes. The Iranian government on the one hand advocates conservative policies in all fields of its administration including the ministry of education. On the other hand, with the arrival of mass media, the satellite, and internet, the Iranian public is also exposed to new and modern methods of thinking and learning. This discrepancy can be clearly noticed in the English lesson curriculum designed by the ministry of education and the English courses offered by private language schools outside school time. Nowadays with the dissatisfaction of the language learners with the grammar translation style classes offered at their schools, most are referring to private institutions for quality language learning. With such a vast number of students referring to private language schools, there has been a sudden increase in the number of language schools in all major cities of the country during the past decade. At present, there are over 5000 private language institutes within the whole country and this number is increasing rapidly (Amjadi, 2012). Private language schools in Iran

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are known for offering good quality education with the latest methods and the best teachers. However, what comprises a good language teacher itself is a controversial issue. The purpose of this paper is to investigate what language learners conceive as a successful and effective language teacher.

2. Review of Literature

Changes in language teaching methods during the past century are directly influenced by the needs that arise from the learners. When modern languages entered the education system in European countries, they were taught using the same methods that were used to teach Latin; that is memorizing lists of vocabulary, strict grammatical rules, and sentences for translation. By the end of the eighteenth century this method became commonplace in all higher education institutes as the standard way of learning a foreign language and was later referred to as grammar translation method.

Some of the main principles of this method were:
- The main purpose of learning a foreign language is learning about its literature
- Reading, writing and explicit grammar are of primary importance.
- Accuracy is of extreme importance
- The students’ native language is used in the classroom.
- Lessons are teacher centered.

After a couple of decades, with the presence of the World Wars in Europe during the beginning of the 20th century, a new need of language learning emerged. The army soldiers, which were sent to Europe to battle it out with the Germans and their allies, were required to learn the language for spoken purposes. The army soldiers were required to gain spoken proficiency rather than written proficiency, which was prevalent in the grammar translation method. This led to a new approach, which emphasizes the spoken aspect of a language rather than the written aspect. The approach adopted by the army later developed into a new approach called the audio-lingual method.

Some of the main principles of this approach are:
- Foreign language learning is a mechanical process and can be achieved through continuous repetition of structures and conversations.
- Spoken form of the language outweighs written form in importance.
- The students’ native language is forbidden in the classrooms.
- There is no tolerance of errors.
- Lessons are teacher centered.

With the expansion of means of transport and the evolving trend of going on summer and winter holidays and business trips, there was an increasing need to improve one’s communicative skills. This need by language learners caused linguistics to think of a new approach, which could satiate the language learners’ needs and desires. This method was called the communicative method, which focused on communicative proficiency of the language learners rather than on the mastery of structures. There is a strong and weak version of this approach. The strong version proposes that language is acquired only through using it. It emphasizes the use of the language in order to gain proficiency whereas the weak version, which has become more readily accepted emphasizes the need to provide students the opportunities to use their English for communicative purposes. In other word, in the stronger form, we are using English to learn it whereas in the weaker version we are learning English to use it. The aim of communicative language teaching as Dell Hyms (1972) described it was to develop a special kind of competence, which is called communicative competence. Possessing communicative competence equips us with the knowledge and the skill to know:

- Whether something (a specific form of language) is formally possible
- Whether it is feasible
Whether it is appropriate
Whether it is actually done

Of primary interest for the purpose of this paper, are the roles of the learners and the teachers in this approach. As mentioned above, in the communicative method the focus is on the process of communication itself rather than mastery of the necessary linguistic items. The learner plays a large role in the class and is expected to participate actively within the class activities. They are also expected to interact with one another during the class rather than just with the teacher. Breen and Candlin (1980) statement regarding the students role clearly shows that learners take on an active role rather than a passive one:

The role of learner as negotiator between the self, the learning process, and the object of learning emerges from and interacts with the role of joint negotiator within the group and within the classroom procedures and activities, which the group undertakes. The implications for the learner is that he should contribute as much as he gains, and thereby learn in interdependent way (p.110)

The teacher’s role on the other hand is to facilitate communication between the learners during the set activities, to provide learners with insight on how to become a successful language learner by sharing his/her own personal experiences of language learning and to organize resources. With the rise of such student centered approaches to language teaching, taking into consideration the students opinions and feelings towards the learning process (Richards & Rogers, 1986).

Much attention has been given to the development and use of instruments to assess the qualities of the classroom-learning environment from the perspective of both teachers and students. As Dr. Simon Borg, a senior lecturer at University of Leeds, believes in preparing future language teachers, language teacher education presumes to have an understanding of “what specifically it means to be a language teacher” (2006, p. 3). However, what are these distinctive characteristics? Are they stable across various socio-cultural contexts? According to Borg, the construct of a language teacher is not a one-size-fits-all phenomenon, and contextual factors may ultimately determine how this construct is conceptualized. For that reason, understanding what it means to be a language teacher in particular teaching and learning contexts is of central concern for language teacher education. Research in this regard is limited and the voice of the most important participant of any language classroom, that is, the student, has been ignored.

As was explained above, in a traditional country like Iran, up to present, most of the teachers and institutions focus was on developing the students’ grammar and vocabulary range. However, with the rise of immigration to English speaking countries, more and more students are feeling the need for a more communicative approach. Private language institutes were quick in satiating this need among their customers. One key feature of communicative methods of language teaching is that the students play a key role and are the centre of attention unlike the traditional methods in which teachers dominate. As Leo Jones (2007: 2) says “A student-centered classroom isn’t a place where the students decide what they want to learn and what they want to do. It’s a place where we consider the needs of the students, as a group and as individuals, and encourage them to participate in the learning process all the time. The teacher’s role is more that of a facilitator.”

With students playing a central role in modern classrooms, researchers are taking more interest in identifying student interests and student preferences in regard to the classroom material, curriculum and the classroom instructor. Khojastemehr & Takrimi (2009) carried out a study in south of Iran to investigate what EFL teachers view as important characteristics of successful teachers, as well as to identify the underlining factors among the response. In their research, 215 secondary English teachers of
which 135 were female and 80 were male answered a 50-item questionnaire, which asked them the characteristics of effective teachers. The results showed that to language teachers, instructional strategies were viewed as more critical for teacher effectiveness than other characteristics. Other research has focused on whether students prefer native language instructors or non-native. The study of Cheung (2002) showed that university students in Hong Kong responded positively to native English instructors. The students believed that native instructors use the language more effectively, provide deeper understanding of the native language culture, and possess better English proficiency. They did however believe that non-native instructors have a better grasp on the grammar than native speakers of the language. Another study carried out at a women’s University Korea asked 105 participants to write their opinion about effective EFL lecturers using a free-writing instrument. The results of the research revealed forty attributes of an effective EFL lecturer (Barnes & Lock, 2010). Other scholars have warned of the dangers of ignoring students’ perception of a good language teacher. Harowitz (1987:119) says “when language classes fail to meet student expectations, students can lose confidence in the instructional approach and their ultimate achievement can be limited”. Even though, research regarding student preferences of language instructors has been carried out before, little, if any have focused on the Iranian language learners. The purpose of this research is to gain insight on these student preferences towards the language instructor.

3. Method

3.1 Research questions

The researchers had the following research questions in mind:

- What are the characteristics of an effective teacher according to students?
- What item has the most priority in each category of the questionnaire according to students?

3.2 Participants

The participants of this research were 42 (3=male, 9=female) students who are currently studying English in levels ranging from pre-intermediate to advanced at a prominent language school in Tabriz, Iran.

3.3 Instruments

The instrument used was a 58-item questionnaire which was developed through meticulous reading of literature, the language schools criteria for teacher observation and the researchers own experience of successful teaching. This 58-item questionnaire was divided into 8 sections. The heading for each section is as follows: Personal Qualities, Command in English, Teaching Methodology, Evaluation Method, Amount of Teacher’s Emphasis on Different Skills, Mastery over teaching, Teacher-Student Relationship and finally Class Management/Institutes Programme. In order to insure the clarity of the questionnaire items, the researchers translated the questionnaire into the students’ national language and gave any necessary clarifications regarding the items before and during the time the questionnaires were being filled out.

3.4 Procedure

Language learners were asked to rate each item according to its importance. The options available for selection were as follows: not important at all, somehow important, important, very important. Students were also asked to compare each item’s importance in comparison to the other items under the same category by numbering each item, with number 1 being the most important item in each category. A free
writing section was also provided if students needed to give elaborations on any of the items or if they needed to refer to a criterion not mentioned in the questionnaire. After the questionnaires were completed, the percentage of each item was calculated.

4. Results

The first section of the questionnaire was regarding the personal qualities of an effective teacher. As can be seen from the table above, the gender, age, appearance and loudness of the teacher is of very little importance to the majority of the students. However, 73.80 % of the students thought that an effective teacher should be interested in his/her job and should show a sense of responsibility towards it. Also there was a consensus among students that the teacher should be lively and active and should be punctual in his/her presence in the class and in returning the students papers. What is more interesting is that a vast number of the students numbered the item: having interest in his/her job & feeling responsible for teaching as their first priority in terms of the importance of the item in comparison to the other nine items in the personal qualities category.

Table 1. Personal Qualities (%)

| Item                                               | First Priority | Not important at all | Somehow Important | Important | Very Important |
|----------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Teacher’s gender                                   | 9.52           | 40.47                | 23.80             | 21.42     | 14.28          |
| Teacher’s age                                      | 2.38           | 28.57                | 38.09             | 21.42     | 11.90          |
| Good Appearance                                    | 4.76           | 9.52                 | 50                | 23.80     | 16.66          |
| Being self-confident                              | 19.04          | 2.38                 | 11.90             | 30.95     | 54.76          |
| Being enthusiastic and lively                      | 14.28          | 0                    | 2.38              | 42.85     | 54.76          |
| Being creative and spontaneous                     | 11.90          | 0                    | 9.52              | 42.85     | 50             |
| Having a loud and clear voice                     | 0              | 7.14                 | 38.09             | 30.95     | 23.80          |
| Being punctual ( in terms of starting the class and returning students’ papers) | 2.38 | 2.38 | 16.66 | 38.09 | 42.85 |
| Having patience with students                      | 16.66          | 0                    | 14.28             | 50        | 35.71          |
| Having interest in his/her job and feeling responsibility for teaching | 59.52 | 0 | 7.14 | 19.04 | 73.80 |
In Table 2, the teacher’s command of the foreign language is taken into consideration. What is evident from this table is that the majority of the students thought that all the items in this category are of importance; in fact, none of the students marked the not important option. In contrast, 83.33% of the students marked accuracy of teacher vocabulary as very important. 52.38% of the students who marked this item also marked it as their first priority in comparison to the other items under this category. It is also evident that the teacher’s intonation plays a lesser role in the students’ perception of an effective teacher.

Table 2. Command in English (%)

| Item                              | First Priority | Not very important | Somehow important | Important | Very important |
|-----------------------------------|----------------|--------------------|-------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Accuracy of teacher vocabulary   | 52.38          | 0                  | 0                 | 16.66     | 83.33          |
| Accuracy of teacher structure    | 47.61          | 0                  | 2.38              | 23.80     | 73.80          |
| Accuracy of pronunciation        | 30.65          | 0                  | 2.38              | 28.57     | 69.04          |
| Accuracy of intonation           | 19.04          | 0                  | 16.66             | 38.09     | 45.23          |
| Fluency in the foreign language  | 21.42          | 0                  | 7.14              | 38.09     | 54.76          |

Regarding the methodology applied in the classrooms, the students showed a preference towards teachers who encourage students to use the L2 in the classroom at all times. More than half of the students (66.66%) marked this item as very important. The second item with the highest percentage belongs to explicit correction of the students’ errors by the teachers. 42.85% of the students have marked this as very important. In addition, using the students’ native language in the classroom was not considered as a merit by the majority of the students; 19.04% of the students marked this item as not important at all and 47.61% marked it as somehow important which shows the modest attention paid to this criterion and that students prefer not to use L1 in the classrooms. Finally, students favour teachers who provide detailed explanation before and during the reading and listening task. 52.38% of the students marked this item as an important feature of a successful teacher. Regarding the priority of the items, the first item that is, using appropriate teaching techniques was marked by 18 of the participants (42.85%) as their first priority in comparison to the other 12 items in this category.
Table 3. Teaching Methodology (%)

| Item                                                      | First Priority | Not important at all | Somehow Important | Important | Very Important |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Using appropriate teaching techniques                     | 42.85          | 0                    | 9.52               | 17        | 21             |
| Using pantomime, pictures and acting to clarify points    | 7.14           | 23                   | 11                 | 12        | 9              |
| Providing detailed explanations while reading/listening (e.g., checking ALL the new vocabularies) | 19.04          | 0                    | 11.90              | 52.38     | 35.71          |
| Using the students’ native language when necessary        | 11.90          | 19.04                | 47.61              | 16.66     | 16.66          |
| Going beyond textbook when teaching                       | 9.52           | 14.28                | 52.38              | 16.66     | 16.66          |
| Providing cultural information about the target language’s culture | 11.90          | 4.76                 | 38.09              | 35.71     | 21.42          |
| Providing explicit error correction                       | 9.52           | 0                    | 9.52               | 47.61     | 42.85          |
| Giving regular homework tasks                            | 11.90          | 7.14                 | 35.71              | 40.47     | 14.28          |
| Use of Pair work                                          | 0              | 11.90                | 40.47              | 35.71     | 11.90          |
| Use of group work                                         | 0              | 14.28                | 40.47              | 35.71     | 11.90          |
| Using suitable amount of teacher talk                     | 2.38           | 0                    | 19.04              | 54.76     | 26.19          |
| Encouraging students to use the English language ALL THE TIME in class | 28.57          | 0                    | 2.38               | 30.95     | 66.66          |

Table 4 is regarding the evaluation methods applied to the classrooms. The majority of the students marked both written and oral forms of evaluation as either important or very important which accentuates the importance of continuous evaluation in the students’ perceptions. In comparing written and oral forms of evaluation, students showed a preference towards oral quizzes with 80.95% of participants marking oral form of evaluation as their first priority.

Table 4. Evaluation Method (%)

| Item                                                      | First Priority | Not important at all | Somehow Important | Important | Very Important |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------|--------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Giving quizzes frequently                                 | 30.95          | 14.28                | 26.19              | 28.57     | 30.95          |
| Asking oral questions at the beginning of each session    | 80.95          | 2.38                 | 9.52               | 28.57     | 59.52          |
The following table shows the students' perceptions towards different skills in a language class. The majority of the students have marked all language skills as important or very important. 73.89% of the students stated that emphasizing speaking is very important. This percentage shows that the majority of the students prefer teachers to work on their oral skills in comparison to other skills. This is reflected in the priority the students gave to teachers who focus on speaking too. More than half of the participants (52.38%) marked this item as their first priority. Moreover, only 2.38 percent of the students marked the not important at all option for emphasizing grammar which shows the modest importance students attribute to grammar.

Table 5. Amount of Teacher’s Emphasis on Different Skills (%)

| Item                        | First Priority | Not important at all | Somehow Important | Important | Very Important |
|-----------------------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------|----------------|
| Emphasizing grammar         | 38.09          | 2.38                 | 9.52              | 42.85    | 45.23          |
| Emphasizing speaking        | 52.38          | 0                    | 9.52              | 16.66    | 73.80          |
| Emphasizing vocabulary      | 21.42          | 0                    | 4.76              | 47.61    | 47.61          |
| Emphasizing listening       | 9.52           | 0                    | 9.52              | 30.95    | 59.52          |

Table 6, concerns the mastery the teacher has over teaching. According to this table, the majority of the students (52.38%) believe that there is no need for the teacher to have any knowledge of the students’ specialist courses. This statistic might have been different if the participants of the research were enrolled in English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course rather than a general English course. In addition, 59.52% of students believed that it is very important that an effective and successful teacher has comprehensive knowledge of the subject matter and that he/she is able to answer the students’ questions. In the free writing section, one of the students mentioned that knowledge of the subject matter is not adequate for a teacher to be considered successful and the he/she must also be able to communicate that knowledge successfully to his/her students. This opinion is also reflected in the importance allocated to the teacher’s ability in transferring ideas and knowledge to the students. 45.23% marked this item as very important and 40.47 percent marked this as important.

Table 6. Mastery over Teaching (%)

| Item                                                   | First Priority | Not important at all | Somehow Important | Important | Very Important |
|--------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|----------|----------------|
| Capability to communicate ideas, knowledge, intended teaching items | 21.42          | 0                    | 14.28             | 40.47    | 45.23          |
| Knowledge of the subject matter                        | 38.09          | 0                    | 7.14              | 33.33    | 59.52          |
| Preparation and lesson planning                         | 28.57          | 2.38                 | 9.52              | 38.09    | 50             |
| Capability to answer students questions                 | 23.80          | 0                    | 4.76              | 35.71    | 59.52          |
| Use of efficient and adequate methods of elicitation while teaching | 4.76           | 2.38                 | 16.66             | 52.38    | 26.19          |
| Ability to guide students to independent learning knowledge of students’ specialist courses | 7.14           | 11.90                | 28.57             | 33.33    | 2.38           |
| Ability to identify the students learning styles        | 21.42          | 4.76                 | 14.28             | 50       | 30.95          |
Regarding teacher student relation, it is evident from the table below that knowledge of the students’ mother tongue lacks importance for a large number of the students as 33.33% have marked this item as not important at all and 33.33% have marked it as somehow important. Students also believed that there is no need for teachers to give feedback to the students’ parents. 59.52% marked it as not important at all and another 33.33% believed it was only somehow important. Other observable figures are regarding the importance students allocate to teachers who create motivation, have respect for students, are kind and friendly with students, encourage participation, ask students for feedback about the lesson and help students to increase their confidence. The majority of students have marked the items listed above as important or very important.

Table 7. Teacher-Student Relation (%)

| Item                                           | First Priority | Not important at all | Somehow Important | Important | Very Important |
|------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|-----------|----------------|
| Having respect for students                    | 42.85          | 0                    | 9.52              | 33.33     | 57.14          |
| Being kind and friendly with students          | 16.66          | 0                    | 11.90             | 47.61     | 40.47          |
| Encouraging participation                      | 19.04          | 2.38                 | 2.38              | 33.33     | 61.90          |
| Creating motivation                            | 45.23          | 0                    | 9.52              | 19.04     | 71.42          |
| Helping to create self-confidence in students  | 16.66          | 2.38                 | 4.76              | 33.33     | 57.14          |
| Attracting and maintaining Students’ attention| 7.14           | 0                    | 21.42             | 57.14     | 21.42          |
| Individual help to students                    | 7.14           | 4.76                 | 35.71             | 38.09     | 21.42          |
| Knowledge of students’ mother tongue           | 7.14           | 33.33                | 33.33             | 19.04     | 14.28          |
| Providing appropriate feedback to students     | 9.52           | 4.76                 | 23.80             | 47.61     | 23.80          |
| Having contact with the students’ parents      | 0              | 59.52                | 33.33             | 7.14      | 0              |
| Asking for students’ feedback (about the class and teaching method) | 7.14 | 4.76 | 26.19 | 50 | 19.04 |
| Being available outside of class                | 2.38           | 33.33                | 28.87             | 33.33     | 4.76           |
The last table is titled class management/institutes programmes. According to this table, using the class time wisely, in other words, not wasting the class time, is largely important to the majority of the students. 73.80% have marked this as very important and another 23.80% have marked it as important. Another substantial figure is regarding the importance students placed on maintaining order in the class. Over 80% of the students have marked this item as either important or very important.

Table 8: Class Management / Institutes Programmes (%)

| Item                                                      | First Priority | Not important at all | Somehow Important | Important | Very Important |
|-----------------------------------------------------------|----------------|----------------------|-------------------|-----------|---------------|
| Use of White board efficiently (using colourful markers and writing well) | 9.52           | 19.04                | 28.57             | 40.47     | 11.90         |
| Using class time wisely                                   | 64.28          | 0                    | 2.38              | 23.80     | 73.80         |
| Maintaining order in Class/Class control                  | 26.19          | 2.38                 | 11.90             | 40.47     | 45.23         |
| Following the material specified and guidelines provided by the institute | 2.38           | 11.90                | 19.04             | 57.14     | 11.90         |
| Movement around the class                                 | 14.28          | 0                    | 35.71             | 33.33     | 30.05         |

5. Conclusion

This investigation established what the students felt were the attributes of effective EFL lecturers. According to this research some of the most important features of an effective and successful EFL teacher are:

- Having interest in his/her job
- Having a sense of responsibility towards his/her job
- Being enthusiastic and lively
- Being self-confident
- Being punctual
- Encouraging students to use the target language at all times
- Providing explicit grammar correction
- Providing detailed explanation during reading and listening tasks
- Emphasizing frequent oral quizzes
- Emphasizing all skills specially speaking
- Having knowledge of subject matter
- Having the ability to communicate ideas effectively
- Having the ability to answer the students questions
- Having respect for students
- Being kind and friendly
- Encouraging participation
- Creating motivation in students
- Helping to increase the students self-confidence during learning
- Taking students feedback about the class into consideration
- Using the class time wisely
- Maintaining class order
Taking the Iranian EFL context into consideration, one tends to realize that the students’ perceptions regarding the teaching and learning process have often been neglected. Teachers and institutional managers have specified certain criteria for teaching without considering the main participant of the classrooms, that is, the students. The findings of the current paper have specific implications for existing and prospective EFL lecturers and teachers. Teachers have to take the students needs and perspectives into consideration when teaching. The old method of teacher-centered classrooms must give way to new student-centered approaches in the Iranian EFL context for successful and effective learning to take place. Teachers must realign their teaching according to the students’ ideas rather than do what they themselves feel is appropriate. The Iranian EFL context demands further research in this regard. Researchers can investigate the implications gender, age, ethnicity, social class have on the students perceptions regarding the teaching process within classrooms. Also such research ought to be carried out on a broader scale to yield more precise results.

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