

Learners' Beliefs of an Effective Teacher: A Case of Iranian Context

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Abstract

The influence that teachers have on learners' achievements is unquestionable. Learners' beliefs and perspectives are also considered as a determining factor in their academic achievements. Sixty students from the University of Tehran's Center for Extra Curricular Activities participated in this study. The participants' perception of their teachers in different aspects, such as Personality of the teacher, Proficiency of the teacher, Teaching skills, was investigated. The findings revealed that teaching skills were viewed, by learners, as the most influential characteristic of a teacher. Proficiency and personality of a teacher were ranked second and third accordingly. The results of the study had certain implications for teachers and teacher educators.

Keywords: Belief, Second Language Acquisition, Efficient Teacher

1. Introduction

The importance of learners' belief about second language acquisition (SLA) has been recently emphasized in the literature [2], [5], [8], [11], [17], [20], [24], [26] due to its probable influence on improving independent language learners in future [5], [24]. Second language teachers and their students may have more or less similar or different understandings of effective teaching, and the meeting point of the two belief systems has certain implications for students' language learning and the effectiveness of instruction [2]. Williams and Burden [25] claimed that "learners' perceptions and interpretations have been found to have the greatest influence on achievement" (p. 98) and maintained that, in some cases, students' perceptions of teacher behaviors might not correspond with their teachers' intentions. Horwitz [10], Kern [12], and Schulz [21] argued the fact that divergence between students' and teachers' expectations and views could harmfully affect L2 students' satisfaction with the language class and could interfere with their learning, and ultimately leading to the discontinuation of L2 study.

Teachers have proved to be very influential on the students [1], [15], [19]. They may change the way and the extent that the learners learn and interact with each other. This requires us to realize what a teacher should do or not do in order to have a constructive effect on learners.

As the literature suggests learners' belief has been mostly neglected in many research or educational setting [1], [13]. Language learners are hardly questioned in any systematic way about their language learning experience and also about their views about their teacher's teaching style and even manner. Rudduck [19] refers to this neglecting of learners' view as "our blind spot" (p. 3). Teachers mostly rely on sources other than students to learn about their effectiveness of teaching [1], [9]. The third reason is the fact that teachers have long denied learners' voice in the classroom [1].

This is specially criticized in by some others [1], [13], [15]. MacBeath and Mortimore [15] argued against neglecting learners and rather claim that learners can be considered as a good source of information to teachers. Kumaravadivelu [13] also encouraged investigating learners' personal approaches and views. Barkhuizen [1] furthered the argument by saying that learners should be encouraged to express their perceptions overtly, both for themselves and to their teachers.

2. Some definitions of the “Effective Teacher”

The literature offered various definitions of an effective teacher. Clark [3] wrote that, “Obviously, the definition involves someone who can increase student knowledge, but it goes beyond this in defining an effective teacher.” Vogt [23] argued that effective teaching is widely related to the ability to provide instruction to different students of different abilities while incorporating instructional objectives and assessing the effective learning mode of the students. Collins [4] established five criteria for an effective teacher as (1) accountability and commitment, (2) knowledge, (3) management, (4) reflection about owns’ practice, and (5) being a member of learning community. Swank, Taylor, Brady, and Frieberg (1989, cited in Clark [3] created their own model of effectiveness that was based upon teacher actions. According to this model, effective meant increasing academic questions and decreasing lecture and ineffective practices, such as negative feedback and low-level questions. Elsewhere, Million [16] argued effectiveness is under the influence of the lesson design and method of delivery.

Whereas some researchers believe that learners’ achievement can be indicative of teachers’ effectiveness in classroom [3], some others believe that there is no single way of estimating effectiveness; effectiveness is mostly pragmatic and context based [18]. To Wenden [24], teacher effectiveness is the biggest and most influential contributor to student success. According to them, teacher effectiveness outweighs all other factors, such as class size, socioeconomic status, and gender.

3. The purpose of the Study

Despite the various complexities of such an undertaking as teaching and specially the concept of effective teaching and teachers and disregarding how scholars define them, there is a consensus that effective teachers have an outstanding impact on the learners. The present study offers some insights regarding the learners’ perception of their teachers in the following aspects: (1) teachers’ personality, (2) teachers’ proficiency, and (3) teachers’ teaching skill. The latter includes factors as evaluation, planning, and teaching techniques. To this end, the present research attempts to answer the following questions:

1. What is the learners’ attitude towards the most and the least important qualities of efficient teachers?
2. Does gender of the subjects affect their views towards teachers’ qualities?

4. Significance of the Study

Research to understanding teachers’ belief is important due to the opportunity it opens for teachers, educators, and researchers to learn why some learners are taking part in certain activities and what is their status in the class. Once teachers gradually get to know their students’ perceptions, they can plan and devise alternative behaviors and activities in case needed in their classes. Learners, on their part, can help their teachers to become aware of the diversity of the individuals playing a role in the classrooms and help them to understand from a learner’s point of view what constitutes a successful classroom and an effective teacher.

5. Method

Expos facto was the design of this study. Expos facto means that the researchers gather information and therefore no manipulation occurs.

6. Participants

51 students (males and females) participated in this study. All the participants were chosen from University of Tehran’s English Language Institute with differing proficiency levels ranging from elementary to advance whose proficiency levels were determined by the institute placement test. The placement test was based on the Interchange series and thus valid.

7. Instrument

A 36-item questionnaire on five option Likert scale was used in this study. The questionnaire was translated into Persian to ensure that the low proficient participants have no problem in understanding and answering the questions. The questionnaire seems to measure seven traits of Teacher's Behavior (questions 1, 6, 8, 11, 15, 16, 20, 28, 30, and 36), Teacher's Knowledge (questions 2, 3, 17, 21, and 27), Classroom Management (questions 4, 19, 23, 24, and 26), Way of Teaching (questions 31, 32, 33, 29, and 5), Creating Awareness in Learners (questions 7, 12, and 9), Teachers' Evaluation (questions 10, 22, 25, 35, 34, and 14), and Encouraging Learners' Autonomy (questions 13 and 18).

The questionnaire has a highly acceptable reliability index ($\alpha = 0.92$). Item total correlation shows that almost all items significantly correlated with the total score except for questions 2, 3, 4, 8, and 12. These items were measuring teachers' mastery in teaching (have a good power of knowledge transmission," teachers' English fluency, teachers' ability to create competition among learners, and dressing well).

8. Analysis and Results

Both descriptive statistics and chi square through Crosstab analysis were used to answer the following questions:

1. What is the learners' attitude towards the most and the least important qualities of efficient teachers?
2. Does gender of the subjects affect their views towards teachers' qualities?

8.1. Analysis One: Frequency

To answer the first question, "what is learners' attitude towards the most and the least important qualities of efficient teachers," first descriptive statistics was run on data to obtain the percentage of learners' attendance to the question. Table 1 shows the results. As is shown in this table, from among 36 questions used in this study, about 92.2% of learners chose question 2 (have a good command of teaching), 88.2 % question 3 (be fluent and eloquent in speaking English), 86.3% question 12 (have a good power of knowledge transmission), and 82.4% question 30 (respect learners) were the most important features of a prospective teacher that learners chose. The least important factor seems to be related measurement; question 25 (take a test at the end of each chapter) has won the least learners' attention (19.6%).

It seems that evaluation criteria have won less attention of learners attended in this study. Item 25 (take a test at the end of each chapter), item 5 (inform the learners of the evaluation methods and goals...), item 34 (be able to employ different evaluation techniques) have got the percentage of 19.6 %, 47.1 %, and 51 % respectively.

A surprising result is that only 50% of the present participants select teachers' appearance as an indicative factor of efficient teachers.

8.2. Analysis Two: Chi Square on Items

To answer the second question of this study, "does gender affect their views towards teachers' qualities?" chi square, through Cross tab, was run on the data twice: once on items and once on hypothetical traits. Gender was used as the independent variable. The results are shown in Tables 1 and 2.

As is shown in Table 1, there is no significant difference between the female and male in answering the questions of the questionnaire. This means that both female and male agree equally on the features of efficient teachers in this sample.

Table 1. Chi Square on Item by Gender

Items	Chi Square Value (df)	Sig (2 tailed)	Items	Chi Square Value (df)	Sig (2 tailed)
1	1.67 (2)	0.433	19	3.215 (4)	0.522
2	0.002 (1)	0.967	20	1.343 (3)	0.719
3	1.203 (2)	0.548	21	1.60 (4)	0.807
4	2.18 (4)	0.702	22	5.967 (5)	0.309
5	3.45 (3)	0.327	23	2.735 (5)	0.741
6	1.209 (2)	0.546	24	7.503 (5)	0.186
7	1.78 (2)	0.410	25	4.694 (5)	0.454
8	2.148 (2)	0.342	26	0.849 (3)	0.838
9	4.20 (3)	0.241	27	3.585 (4)	0.465
10	7.433(4)	0.115	28	4.972 (4)	0.290
11	4.467 (3)	0.21	29	10.099 (5)	0.072
12	1.648 (2)	0.439	30	4.03 (3)	0.258
13	2.768 (3)	0.429	31	2.045 (4)	0.727
14	8.100 (5)	0.151	32	2.266 (4)	0.687
15	1.759 (3)	0.624	33	2.383 (5)	0.794
16	3.574 (2)	0.167	34	6.47 (5)	0.263
17	4.011 (3)	0.260	35	4.482 (4)	0.345
18	6.932 (4)	0.140	36	3.803 (4)	0.433

Table 2 shows the results of second chi square of traits through crosstabs. As is shown in this table, there is no significant difference between females' and males' performance participated in this study. Of course, there is a trend difference in item 6

Table 2. Chi Square on Traits by Gender

Items	Item name	Chi Square Value (df)	Sig (2 tailed)
1	Teacher's Behavior	17.67 (12)	0.123
2	Teachers' Knowledge	8.727(8)	0.366
3	Class Management	11.261 (12)	0.507
4	Ways of Teaching	9.117 (11)	0.611
5	Creating Awareness	5.116 (5)	0.402
6	Evaluation	24.599 (16)	0.077
7	Autonomy	4.859 (7)	0.677

8.3. Discussion

As was evident in the body of the research, learners' belief can have some constitutive components as (1) Teacher's Behavior, (2) Teachers' Knowledge, (3) Class Management, (4) Ways of Teaching, (5) Creating Awareness, (6) Evaluation, and (7) Autonomy. The results of the study indicated that employing the teaching techniques, in students' viewpoint is believed to be the most significant factor in teachers' efficacy. Teaching techniques are believed to have noticeable effects on students' learning. Having been a supervisor of the University of Tehran's center for extra curriculum studies, the first author has closely noticed that the teachers who employed more creative techniques which suited the learner's different proficiency level had always ranked at the top of the evaluation list.

Learners always opt for a teacher who knows how to teach and how to approach different problematic areas. The teachers who employ creative techniques are always welcomed by students. This idea is well supported by some big names including Vygotsky (as cited in [6]) who believes that creativity is promoted by a mental atmosphere at school which is purposively organized. It

stimulates children to focus on creative activities, hence indirectly – it happens with the mediation of a creative environment. Thus, we conclude that teachers can motivate the creativity of learners.

Proficiency of a teacher, according to the data analysis, was the second desirable factor for an effective teacher in the eyes of the learners. Proficiency of the teacher is one of the features that impress the learners from the very first session of the class. Therefore, if a teacher lacks the required proficiency level, he would not be as successful in learners' viewpoint.

The third desirable factor of an effective teacher has been viewed to be teachers' power in knowledge transmission. That is to say, no matter how knowledgeable a teacher is, he/she should have the ability to transmit his/her knowledge to the students. Therefore, it is not extraneous to say that having the knowledge is one issue and having the power to transmit it is another. The key is in knowing how to pair them in a complementary and mutual fashion.

The fourth factor is teachers' respect towards learners. In general, teacher's behavior in class has a direct role in reducing or enhancing anxiety among learners [10]. Good and respectful behavior towards students will bring about a stress free and friendly atmosphere which can greatly induce high levels of language learning. On the other extreme, discourteous and impolite demeanor will distance students from the teacher and will end in a climate of hatred and aloofness between the learners and the teacher; hence reducing learning. In short, the more relaxed and the more uninhibited learners feel, the better will they be positioned to cope with the task of understanding and producing a second language.

The fifth factor is teachers' ability to enhance learners' eagerness for learning. There are always some students who need to be pushed to produce some language [22]. These learners will never get involved in the act of learning and production unless they find some interest in the task. One of the major jobs of an EFL/ESL teacher is to create the task in a way that induces interest and enthusiasm in the learner. In this case, learners will always be expecting a new approach to doing tasks and this will incredibly increase the level of learning among all learners, particularly those uninterested.

Evaluation techniques were placed as the last priority by students. They viewed it as the least important factor for an effective teacher. There might be one justification for such given unimportance to the evaluation techniques and that is the students' views toward assessment and evaluation. In the Iranian context, especially in highly important courses, evaluation has been regarded as a threat which has an irreparable influence on the learners' future. Part of this negativity is mainly derived from teachers' and parents' attitudes towards evaluation. Through this justification we can conclude that when it comes to the teachers' evaluation techniques, the students' judgments and beliefs will be largely influenced by their attitudes which as discussed are mainly derived from the previous generations.

9. Implications of the study

The findings of the present study have implications mainly for the teachers. As for the "teaching techniques" if teachers want to be successful in their teaching career, they should heed their teaching techniques. This study has a message for teacher educators who are in charge of training pre-service teachers in that they would be better off including teaching techniques and strategies in their training agenda. Of course, in my view, a major part of the teaching techniques go back to the teacher's personality. In my MA thesis, I argued that people with extroverted personality type better deal with the surrounding problems. In the case of this study, extroverted teachers are believed to be more skillful in devising more efficient techniques and employing them in their classrooms. Moreover, teachers with more extroversion type are more self-efficacious and thus more skillful at finding solutions to unpredictable problems.

Teachers should also improve their proficiency in English. Again referring to my professional experience, more proficient teachers had often sat at the top of the evaluation list. Interestingly enough, those teachers, among others, were the ones that had the most usage of effective teaching techniques. It seems that there should be a relationship between teachers'

proficiency and their exploitation of effective teaching techniques. In order to unfold this relationship more research should be conducted in this respect.

According to Kiany [14] more extroverted people were known to be more proficient users of English. Building on this study, we can conclude that working on the personality traits of the teachers may have desirable consequences on their teaching performance.

One implication of this finding can be the idea of working on the more introverted teachers to remove their psychological filters that impede their potentialities. In other words, by working on teachers' personality traits (in this case, extroversion) we may be able to take a step towards the betterment of their proficiency.

An effective teacher should always have a mental or written syllabus for himself. Lesson planning has the advantage of organizing your line of thought. You can present your teaching materials in order and as programmed. It gives a sort of organization to the process of teaching. Of course, it should be noted that the syllabus as "work plan", a term used by Ellis [7] might not always be implemented as expected since we, as teachers, are dealing with humans and humans' behavior is unpredictable and sometimes the teacher has to deviate the planned syllabus and go through other areas in order to get a problem solved. Therefore the syllabus as "work plan" will not always match the syllabus as "process" [7]. In spite of this, having a prior planning is of certain advantages particularly when it comes to pre-service and novice teachers. They are strongly recommended to have a written plan in their early years of teaching and as they get fueled by experience they can more rely on their experience and gained self-efficacy. Anyhow, planning is recommended for all teachers. It is also suggested that teacher educators provide their student teachers with non-threatening means of evaluation. Evaluation is an inseparable part of teaching and if more positive viewpoints on the part of the students are to be fostered, closer attention needs to be invested on evaluation techniques and devising alternatives to evaluation.

10. References

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11. Appendix A: Descriptive Statistics

	Questions	1	2	3	4	5
	I believe teachers should	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)	F (%)
Q	Teacher's Behavior					
1	Sincere relationship with learners	0	0	3 (5.9)	15 (29.4)	33 (64.7)
6	Have a sense of humor	0	0	11 (21.6)	13 (25.5)	27 (52.9)
8	Dress up	0	0	12 (23.5)	15 (29.4)	24 (47.1)
11	Provide learners with a stress free learning atmosphere	0	1 (2)	1 (2)	16 (31.4)	33 (64.7)
15	Be flexible to criticisms	0	1 (2)	2 (3.9)	12 (23.5)	36 (70.6)
16	Be neat in appearance	0	0	6 (11.8)	18 (35.3)	27 (52.9)
20	Be patient in giving answer to learners' questions	1 (2)	0	3 (5.9)	12 (23.5)	35 (68.6)
28	Be well dressed	1	1	7	15	27

		(2)	(2)	(13.7)	(29.4)	(52.9)
30	Respect learners	1 (2)	0	2 (3.9)	6 (11.8)	42 (82.4)
36	Not discriminate between the learners	2 (4)	0	1 (2)	10 (19.6)	38 (74.5)
Q	Teacher's Knowledge					
2	Have a good command of teaching	0	0	0	4 (7.8)	47 (92.2)
17	Have teaching experience	0	3 (5.9)	4 (7.8)	9 (17.6)	35 (68.6)
21	Be highly educated	1 (2)	3 (5.9)	9 (17.6)	22 (43.1)	16 (31.4)
27	Should be updated and know about the most recent scientific breakthroughs	3 (5.9)	3 (5.9)	6 (11.8)	18 (35.3)	21 (41.2)
3	Be fluent and eloquent in speaking English	0	0	1 (2)	5 (9.8)	45 (88.2)
Q	Classroom Management					
19	Properly Use the whole class time for teaching or evaluation	1 (2)	2 (3.9)	7 (13.7)	11 (21.6)	30 (58.8)
23	Spare equal eye contact at the learners	4 (7.9)	1 (2)	5 (9.8)	15 (29.4)	26 (51)
24	Control the mischievous learners	6 (11.8)	1 (2)	10 (19.6)	15 (29.4)	19 (37.3)
26	Be organized in teaching the materials	3 (5.9)	0	3 (5.9)	13 (25.5)	5 (32)
4	Create a constructive competition between learners	1 (2)	1 (2)	2 (9.8)	18 (35.3)	26 (51)
Q	Way of Teaching					
31	Stick to English language when teaching	1 (2)	3 (5.9)	8 (15.7)	13 (25.5)	26 (51)
32	Have a recap of the topics at the end of the session	1 (2)	3 (5.9)	6 (11.8)	11 (21.6)	30 (58.8)
33	Be learner-centered	6 (11.7)	1 (2)	7 (13.7)	17 (33.3)	20 (39.2)
29	Express his/her expectations of the learners	3 (5.9)	2 (3.9)	9 (17.6)	17 (33.3)	20 (39.2)
5	Inform the learners of the evaluation methods and goals in the outset of the course	0	2 (3.9)	3 (5.9)	22 (43.1)	24 (47.1)
Q	Creating Awareness in Learners					
7	Enhance the crave for learning among learners	0	0	1 (2)	10 (19.6)	40 (78.4)
12	have a good power of knowledge transmission	0	0	1 (2)	6 (11.8)	44 (86.3)
9	Guide learners on how to overcome the learning problems	0	1 (2)	4 (7.8)	11 (21.6)	35 (68.6)
Q	Teachers' Evaluation					
10	Evaluate learners' assignments	3 (5.9)	3 (5.9)	9 (17.6)	16 (31.4)	20 (39.2)
22	frequently Evaluate learners	4	2	6	21	18

	understanding throughout the course	(7.9)	(3.9)	(11.8)	(41.2)	(35.3)
25	Take a test at the end of each chapter	9 (17.6)	7 (13.7)	12 (23.5)	13 (25.5)	10 (19.6)
35	Be able to evaluate the level of learners understanding	5 (9.8)	0	4 (7.8)	18 (35.3)	24 (47.1)
34	Be able to employ different evaluation techniques	3 (5.9)	1 (2)	6 (11.8)	15 (29.4)	26 (51)
14	Assess learners understanding by frequent questioning	3 (5.9)	2 (3.9)	6 (11.8)	17 (33.3)	23 (45.1)
Q	Encouraging Learners' Autonomy					
13	Allow learners to voice their ideas	0	1 (2)	4 (7.8)	9 (17.6)	37 (72.5)
18	Use various methods to encourage learners to express themselves in English	3 (5.9)	1 (2)	5 (9.8)	16 (31.4)	26 (51)

Note: "Q" stands for questions