TESOL TEACHERS' DIVERGENT REFLECTIVE THINKING ON WHAT MAKES A LANGUAGE TEACHER "GOOD"

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ABSTRACT

Current literature reflects disparate characteristics of good language teachers: Harmer (2008) suggests that good language teachers should have sufficient knowledge of the language; studies from Grundy et al., (2005) and Mullock (2003) both suggest the importance of teachers' ability to understand students' needs, while Brown (1994) discusses the importance of the desire to upgrade teaching skills. With divergent views concerning numerous characteristics that can improve one's language teaching skills and enhancing teaching/learning effectiveness, it seems logical to assume teachers have their beliefs on what characteristics of good language teachers are more important than others. To this end, taxonomy with the characteristics of good language teachers drawn from the literature was developed by the researcher. Through ranking these characteristics in the taxonomy, this study explores what points of agreement or divergence emerge from the rankings by Chinese college TESOL teachers in Taiwan. Findings show that even with limited characteristics of good language teachers presented in the taxonomy, colleagues at the same department and school still have conflicting rankings. It was also revealed that the characteristics they perceived as important when they were students are quite different from those characteristics they currently perceive to be important. This research revealed that Chinese TESOL colleagues have strikingly different beliefs about the important characteristics of good language teachers, as well as demonstrated the importance of reflection by language teachers upon their own beliefs and the need to share those beliefs with their students.

Keywords: TESOL teachers, good language teachers, college English

INTRODUCTION

Anecdotal evidence during my own teaching experience at a college of foreign languages highlighted the idea that Chinese students studying English as a second language believe their teachers are an essential part of their language learning experience. They believe the success of their language education can be determined by which teachers in the department they have the good (or bad) fortune to have as instructors. If students believe their teachers are charged with such an influential role in language classrooms, I next wondered: What makes a language teacher good? Current literature has listed several characteristics good language teachers should possess sufficient knowledge of the language or the ability to understand the needs of students. There is no doubt that teachers assume several key roles in the language classroom: as educators transmitting knowledge, as facilitators assisting students with their learning, and as motivators inspiring students to achieve their language goals, to name a few. As any one teacher is unlikely to possess the full range of characteristics suggested in the literature, it seems prudent for language teachers to reflect on important characteristics good language teacher should possess to benefit their students' language learning to create a more successful language learning experience.

Two research questions were designed to explore beliefs college TESOL teachers have about the characteristics of good language teachers:

1. How do college TESOL teachers rank the characteristics of good language teachers?
2. What points of agreement or divergence emerge from the rankings by college TESOL teachers of the characteristics of good language teachers?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Defining good language teachers is a complex matter. Relevant discussions found in the literature coalesced around two types of sources: the views of authors offered in their own theoretical discussions, and the data of researchers obtained from empirical studies conducted with language teachers and/or language learners in various language learning contexts. Authors generally offered a comprehensive theoretical overview of the characteristics of good language teachers in accordance with language teaching theories. Harmer (2008, p.23) mentions that a good language teacher should have sufficient knowledge of the language and interesting things to say in class. They also should be passionate and enthusiastic in their teaching and be able to effectively explain the use of the language, e.g. grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary to students. Brown (1994, p.428) believes good language teachers should have received "competent preparation leading to a degree in TESL" and be imbued with a "feeling of excitement about one's work." Brown also talks about the importance of the ability to understand and adapt to different cultures and the desire to upgrade teaching skills. Both Kral (1988) and Shulman (1987) emphasize the importance of teachers reflecting on their own teaching. In particular, Shulman considers it essential for teachers to look "back at the teaching and learning that has occurred" for it is through the processes of re-thinking, analyzing, and reconstructing teaching steps that a "professional learns from experience" (p.19).

Data derived from empirical research with language teachers and language learners revealed humanistic aspects of the teacher's role toward students. Mainland Chinese students identified being patient as well as humorous among the top three expectations they have of a good teacher in addition to the teacher possessing deep knowledge (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, p.187). Postgraduate TESOL students opined that the essential characteristics of a good TESOL teacher includes knowing and understanding the strengths and weaknesses, and needs of students, and treating students with courtesy and respect, while also keeping up-to-date in knowledge and skills (Mullock, 2003, p.10). A few studies have explored the views of both language students and teachers at the same time. Both high school English students and teachers in Israel considered it important for language teachers to effectively transmit teaching content in an easily understandable way, and to treat students fairly and equitably. However, their first priority was for English language teachers to have "an adequate command of the subject matter, i.e. his or her mastery of the four basic linguistics skills – reading, writing, speaking, and understanding" (Brosh, 1996, p.129). Undergraduate students and English teachers at a university in Yeman both agreed that the ability of a teacher to plan and deliver an effective lesson, as well as fluency and good communication skills in the foreign language are essential characteristics of a good EFL teacher (Kadha, 2009).

Finally, Borg (2006, p. 24) asked language teachers to identify distinctive features of good language teachers which distinguish them from teachers of other subjects: having more communication in the classroom; exhibiting creativity, flexibility, and enthusiasm; and employing more diverse teaching methodology were believed to be characteristics unique to good language teachers.

The characteristics of good language teachers mentioned above were selected from an abundance of traits offered in the literature discussed. While it seems necessary to confine within limits the number of characteristics under discussion, the characteristics presented form a representative sample of the disparity of opinions on the topic. Even from this restricted selection there is an absence of consistent, clear criteria of the most important characteristics of good language teachers. Due to the complexity of the issue this may not be surprising, yet in spite of the fact that "very different people make good teachers for very different reasons" (Prodromou, 1991, p.3) it seems valid to attempt some sort of a classification of the various characteristics of good language teachers. Synthesizing the characteristics mentioned in the literature discussed above, the following taxonomy is offered for analytical purposes:

    a. Having a Good Command of the L2 (e.g. fluent in the foreign language with good communication skills)

    b. Possess Sound Teaching Skills (e.g. employs diverse teaching methodology)

    c. Teacher Empathy toward Students (e.g. knows and understands students' needs, and strengths and weaknesses)

    d.   Personal Qualities (e.g. is patient and humorous)

    e.   Reflection and Improvement (e.g. reflects on their own teaching and keeps up-to-date in knowledge and skills)

This section has reviewed relevant literature on the characteristics of good language teachers. Based on the literature, five categories of the characteristics good language teachers should possess were derived for this study. This taxonomy is not meant to be a comprehensive overview of all the important characteristics of good language teachers, rather, they are simply the most salient characteristics chosen by this researcher based on the discussions in the literature. Other researchers might offer a different interpretation as to what constitutes the most salient characteristics of good language teachers, and thus propose a different taxonomy.

RESEARCH METHODS

The taxonomy mentioned in the previous section was designed as an analytical tool for the purposes of this research project. Participants in this study ranked the importance of each category and commented on these categories. The intention of this taxonomy was to be succinct to facilitate research participants making comparisons. This study was not meant to broadly obtain the research participants' insights into their reported perceptions of good language teachers (Borg, 1996), rather the intention was to explore agreement and divergence among TESOL teachers when forming a hierarchy of the categories of the characteristics of good language teachers within the taxonomy.

This research was conducted at a college of foreign languages in southern Taiwan. This sample pool was a convenience sample since the researcher had little difficulty accessing teachers that were teaching English to native-Chinese students at this site. Two Chinese TESOL teachers participated in semi-structured interviews in which they ranked and commented on the importance of the characteristics of good language teachers offered in the taxonomy. One teacher, Sabrina (a pseudonym), was teaching English to freshmen language learners at the time of this research; the other teacher, Irene (a pseudonym), was teaching English to sophomore language learners.

The interview started with a list of probe questions: Have you ever had a good language teacher? What qualities made that teacher good? What about a language teacher that you considered not good, what qualities were lacking in such a teacher? Probe questions were followed by unanticipated questions in reply to interviewees' responses (Bryman, 2004). Probe questions were intended to allow interviewees to explore their own characteristics of language teachers based on personal experience. It was hoped that through sharing their personal experiences, the interviewees would become more relaxed, more willing to share their opinions. Then participants were presented with the taxonomy with 1-2 specific characteristics for each category as examples. They were then asked to rank the categories according to their importance and explain the reasons for their choices. They were also asked to comment on each category (e.g. raise some questions, or add to the examples of the category). The 30-minute interviews were conducted in Mandarin Chinese – the native language of the interviewees.

All the semi-structured interviews were transcribed in Mandarin Chinese first, and then translated into English. The data in the translated English transcripts were then coded and analyzed. At the end, these two sets of data from the two teacher-participants were collated in order to discover points of agreement or divergence.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

Sabrina's Interview

From the five categories forming the taxonomy, Sabrina ranked the ability to reflect on teaching and to improve as the most important characteristic a good language teacher should possess. This was followed by possessing sound teaching. The least important characteristic a good language teacher should possess was having a good command of the L2. Sabrina expounded on the importance of teachers reflecting on their teaching and updating their teaching knowledge:

Yes, it's very important [to update your teaching styles]. It's boring if we teach the students in the same way all the time. The world is changing, and we have to change, too. You don't have to make big

changes, but you do need to adjust your lesson plans and teaching style to suit the environment (Interview, June 18, 2009)

Sabrina criticized teachers who are hired for their ability to speak the language but do not have a sound pedagogical foundation. She explained that one's language ability is not necessarily an indicator of teaching competence:

I've seen someone who speaks a language very well, but he can't teach. Even though you speak a language well, it does not mean that your lecture makes students learn something (Interview, June 18, 2009)

Sabrina expressed that sufficient knowledge of the L2 is adequate for college-level language teaching. "As long as they can understand what the teacher is saying" then learning can take place because "students are already somewhat proficient in English before they study in college." She finds other characteristics in other categories more important than this one.

Another interesting issue that surfaced from this interview was how the characteristics she perceived as 'good' when she was a student differ from her current perspectives now as a language teacher. In the interview, she talked about two good English teachers she had when she was a language student, one was good due to her sound teaching skills of English pronunciation and the other was good due to his patience with students:

At that time, the teacher taught us the correct pronunciation, and I think she was good at teaching KK phonics. In this way, I learned KK phonics well. Because of that, my good pronunciation helped me a lot when I went abroad. The second one is my ESL teacher in high school when I studied in the U.S. He was a teacher with great patience (Interview, June 18, 2009)

Both sound teaching skills and personal qualities were not ranked by Sabrina as the most important characteristics she now holds. This indicates that the characteristics of good language teachers can be a dynamic concept that changes over time. How a student views a good language teacher could be very different from the characteristics language teachers believe are important. This could lead to a significant gap that fosters mismatched expectations between a language teacher and her students. A language learner might expect the teacher to exhibit sound teachings kills and possess favorable personal qualities (e.g. patience), while the teacher may believe reflecting on her own teaching and keeping up-to-date are more desirable characteristics to cultivate. Such a mismatch could create tension in the classrooms as the teacher strives to fulfill her own expectations which students may not appreciate.

Irene's Interview

Contrary to Sabrina's ranking, Irene selected having a good command of the L2 as the most important characteristic for a good language teacher to possess, followed by sound teaching skills and empathy toward students. Irene stated that a good command of English for a TESOL teacher was a key prerequisite for a good language teacher to have:

From a professional viewpoint, I believe a good language teacher should at least have a good command of the L2. In other words, if you are teaching a language to others, you should at least know the language well enough yourself (Interview, June 25, 2009)

Irene's opinion echoes Brosh (1996) whose research participants also mentioned the teacher's command of the target language (speaking, reading, writing, and understanding) was vital. The least important category in Irene's opinion was a teacher's personal qualities. However, her opinion on the importance of this category was split. On the one hand, she feels being humorous or active in the classroom is an innate quality that "is hard to ask people to change" in order to have the necessary characteristics of a good language teacher. On the other hand, she found the quality of having patience indeed important for language teachers. Hence, while ranking a teacher's personal qualities the least important; she did single out the quality of having patience as an exception.

Reflecting Sabrina's view, Irene declared that her conception of the characteristics a good language teacher should possess is now different from when she was a student. When referring to her own past

language learning experience, Irene mentioned that as a student she focused more on the pragmatic qualities of good teachers. Irene wanted good language teachers to possess sound teaching skills that enabled students to do well on comprehensive exams.

At that time, we considered a good teacher was someone who could help us get a very high score in the entrance exams (Interview, June 25, 2009)

To sum up, this section has presented interview data from Sabrina and Irene, who ranked the characteristics of good language teachers based on items in the taxonomy offered to them during the interview. The next section will discuss how these two teachers' points of views on the taxonomy of good language teachers agree or disagree.

DISCUSSION

Points of Agreement

These two teachers both suggest that it is very hard to define good language teachers, and it should be evaluated from different points of view. For instance,

Sabrina: Whether someone is a good teacher should be defined from various aspects (Interview, June 18, 2009)

Irene: It is really hard to define. It is hard to define a good language teacher (Interview, June 25, 2009)

This mirrors many researchers (e.g. Grundy *et al.,* 2005; Mullock, 2003) in that there should not be a clear-cut answer when it comes to good language teachers since it involves many aspects and various language teachers are good for various reasons (Prodromou, 1991). Perhaps one reason that it is hard to define characteristics of a good language teacher is due to the fact that these characteristics may vary due to different age groups of learners. This is in connection with an unexpected theme that emerged from the interview data. In the interviews, both teachers seemed to indicate that their ranking of the characteristics of good language teachers may vary depending upon the age of the language learners. Irene said:

If we are talking about teaching English to children, it would be a different situation. My choices of what would be important would not be the same (Interview, June 25, 2009)

It is certainly possible that even students within the same age group have different needs and expectations of good language teachers. Defining good language teachers broadly within an entire cultural group (as Cortazzi & Jin, 1996, have done with Chinese students), or defining a certain age group of learners, rather than treating each individual class group uniquely could miss the specifics of a particular class group's identity. After all, each individual class group exerts their own ideas into the language learning mix (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). The ideas of any single class group may converge into different perspectives or expectations of the characteristics good language teachers should possess.

Points of Divergence

Even with a succinct taxonomy based on salient characteristics chosen from discussions in the literature, both Sabrina and Irene still seem to have very different rankings on the importance of these categories. Sabrina believes that language teachers' ability to reflect on their teaching and improve their teaching skills is the important category while a teacher's good command of the L2 is viewed as the least important category. This is in a direct contrast to Irene who believes a teacher's good command of the L2 is the most important characteristic good language teacher should possess. These points of divergence signal how each teacher has his or her own teaching beliefs. What one teacher finds important could be very different and even contradictory to another even if both teachers are considered effective language teachers, as Prodromou (1991, p.2) declares: "there are many different and contradictory qualities that contribute to effective teaching."

Because teachers hold diverse beliefs which may result in different teaching styles, it seems incumbent on teachers to explain to their language learners their own beliefs, personal teaching style, and other

relevant issues, for example, how one's teaching beliefs may affect classroom grading criteria, the teaching process, and the choice of classroom activities. This research is not meant to suggest teachers change their beliefs or styles in order to fit into the formula of a good language teacher since there very well may not be a "formula for good teaching" (Prodromou, 1991, p.3). Instead, this research is meant to raise a language teacher's awareness of the diversity of expectations as to what may constitute characteristics of good language teachers; and also to encourage language teachers to initiate communication with their students to discuss these issues. With a greater understanding through communication of the beliefs both teacher and student hold, students may be more likely to support what the teacher does in the classroom, and the teacher may experience less resistance from students. Thereby creating a more effective language teaching and learning experience. Brosh (1996, p.126) signals the importance of a harmonious classroom atmosphere:

As teaching is a two-way process, the quality of the teacher-student interaction is significant in determining whether or not the teacher has the support of his or her students.

CONCLUSION

This study explored TESOL teachers' own reflective thinking on the important characteristics of good language teachers. Two Chinese TESOL teachers at a College of Foreign Languages in Taiwan participated in this study through semi-structured interviews. In the interviews, the research participants were presented with taxonomy of important characteristics of good language teachers and were asked to rank their importance accordingly. Two important findings surfaced from the interviews:

Teachers' rankings on the important characteristics of good language teachers can be very different. In this study, these two teachers seemed to have divergent ideas about what they believe are the most important characteristics of good language teachers. Sabrina believes a teacher's ability to reflect on teaching and improve teaching skills is the most important characteristic while Irene interprets having a good command of the L2 as the most important characteristic. This characteristic, having a good command of the L2, is actually something Sabrina finds the least important. This demonstrates that teacher beliefs of what makes a good language teacher varies, hence their approach to teaching in the classroom would likely be different from each other as well. Such differences could result in students feeling confused or even finding it difficult to adjust to a teacher's approach in the classroom. This research may have important implications for how teachers engage with students in a discourse on their beliefs and approaches to teaching: what characteristics they believe are important for good language teachers to possess, why they are important, how those characteristics may affect expectations of students, etc. Through a stimulating dialogue a growing understanding of teachers' expectations and learners' expectations might emerge which could result in more effective learning. As Penner (1992, p.16) describes, "the key to effective teaching lies in the growth and improvement of classroom communication."

Interview data also revealed that views of the most important characteristics of good language teachers fluctuate over time and according to circumstances. Characteristics teachers currently perceive as important for good language teachers to possess are different from what was believed when they were students. In addition, these two teachers seemed to imply that their perspectives of good language teachers could vary for different groups of learners according to age. All these findings suggest that language teachers should not be defined as a general, global phenomenon that applies to all contexts. The concept of what makes a language teacher good is individualistic and complex. As Borg (2006, p.29) concludes in his study, research of distinctive language teachers would be most "productive" and "practical" when it is conducted in "specific language teaching contexts," since the "language teacher is not a monolithic phenomenon amenable to globally meaningful definition" (p.26). This study suggests that sometimes there could even be diversity of perspectives within the same teaching contexts among college-age learners of a similar ethnic background (e.g. Chinese students). Hence, the concept of good language teachers might be worth investigating based on each class group's perspective to better disclose and recognize each group's individuality.

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