

What Constitutes an Effective English Teacher: Perceptions of Thai Tertiary Learners in Thailand

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Abstract

Globalization and superdiversity has brought about many studies in ELT institutions globally into what constitutes an effective English teacher in the 21st Century, but such works have been studied from the viewpoints of teachers, with little or no attention paid to this same phenomenon from the student's point of view. Therefore, this paper examines the realistic change in views of who an effective English language teacher is as perceived by Thai tertiary learners in Thailand. The study further accounts for why this issue is a prevailing reality in this context. A questionnaire survey sampling method was employed to collect data constituting 16 undergraduate tertiary learners of English major in Thailand, prior to the utilization of a semi-structured interview. The data analysis was content-based on the initial, semi-structured questionnaire of 100 students. The findings showed that the learners de-emphasized nationality, place of birth, physical appearance and first language as relevant constituents of effective English teachers as these are not representative of their (in)ability to teach English. For them, a professional or unqualified English teacher should be measured through robust and practical characteristics: personal characteristics, pedagogical characteristics, cultural sensitivity, linguistic characteristics, and Professional characteristics. These have practical implications for the recruitment and employment of teachers in Thailand as English teachers.

Keywords: tertiary learners' voices, effective English teacher, Thai context

■ Introduction

It is an undeniable realism that teachers play an important role in the learning of students. As a result, they are seen as indispensable to students' academic performance and can have a major impact on their learning outcomes (Aaronson, Barrow, & Sander, 2007). Effective teachers and teaching as an area of study has interestingly focused on the specific characteristics and traits that should define effective teaching and teachers (Guihang, & Miao, 2019; Park & Lee, 2006). For some researchers (Al-Seghayer, 2017; Arikan, Taser, & Sarac-suzer, 2008; Brown, 2001) amongst others, the characteristics of an effective English teacher's teaching, both within and outside the language education domain is an area that needs further exploration. Such research studies showed that the features of effectiveness of English teachers that can be generalized to any educational environment were not unanimously accepted by participants from different contexts. While there seem to be universal principles concerning the features of an effective

English teacher (Borg, 2006; Liando, 2015), some may not be realistic, notably when learning goals, tasks, and atmosphere vary from those of other subjects in the field of Foreign and Second language Teachings.

Therefore, to define the term "features of effective language teachers," the sense of teaching and learning must be taken into account. Put differently, it will give a clearer reason for why such researchers chose these attributes as representations of effective English teachers if they are to consider the aspects of effective English teachers in a specific context, including their teaching, learning and cultural background, beliefs and attitudes. The study therefore aims to examine from the viewpoint of Thai EFL tertiary undergraduate learners the features of effective English teachers and to analyse the connection between the effective teaching of the teachers and their nativeness background. The following research questions addressed these research aims:

1. What constitutes an Effective English Teacher from Thai EFL Tertiary Learners viewpoints?

2. What existing relationship prevails (if any) of teacher's nativeness background and how effective they teach?

■ Effective English teacher's characteristics

This study operationalizes teaching as an array of skills, knowledge and personal qualities in a dynamic interplay (Al-Seghayer, 2017; Guihang and Miao, 2019; Hollins, 2011). This implies it is 'a serious business requiring intensive training and stringent quality control, and complex pedagogical preparation and practice (Canagarajah, 1999; Llorca, 2009). As a high level profession, the teaching job can be seen to include analytical methods in addition to the fact that various skills are required. More importantly, successful teaching is described as what teachers do in the classroom with respect to the way their students learn' and 'products' approaches. Nghia (2015) and Vogt (1984) connect efficient teaching with instruction-providing ability of the teachers, integrating educational goals and the most effective learning mode for students in order to provide instruction to different students with different skills. Similarly, Hunt (2009) provides a generic concept of effective teaching in which the qualities, abilities and actions of the educator are gathered at all levels of education, allowing students to meet desired outcomes including achievement of specific learning goals and wider targets, such as problem solving, critical thinking and working together.

The bulk of the earlier studies concentrated on the characteristics of successful language teachers, whether from the perspective of students or educators themselves. There are, however, fewer researches involving their primary participants as students and teachers (e.g. Park & Lee, 2006). The research (Park & Lee 2006) investigated the attitudes of students and teachers in Korea towards effective English teachers through a questionnaire consisting of three categories: English, pedagogic and socio-affectivity. All in all, the findings have shown teachers to have different characteristics from the choice of the students. English was the most important feature for teachers to be considered effective teachers, while pedagogical experience was seen by students as being the most important feature.

The Thailand National Standards for English Language Teachers, established by Office of the Basic Education Commission (2005) office in Thailand suggested that every good English teacher could be considered in three main areas or strands; linguistic characteristics, pedagogical abilities, and professional development. In previous research on the characteristics of effective English teachers in Thailand, several studies have also been found.

The recent survey was conducted by Wichadee (2010), who analyzed impressions of the characteristics of successful English language teachers by Thai university students and Thai EFL teachers based on four categories 1) English skills; 2) pedagogical knowledge; 3) interpersonal and communication skills; and 4) socio-affective skills. The results revealed that the students rated as the most important skills interpersonal and communication skills of the teachers. From another perspective, from the point of view of the teachers the findings were the same as the studies carried out by Ghasemi and Hashemi (2011) and Park and Lee (2006), which found English skills to be regarded as the most important quality of successful English teachers.

Within the literature, it can be clearly seen that English language teachers' characteristics have been constructed into five categories: 1) Professional qualifications: teaching experience (Brown, 2001) and EFL-related qualifications (Brown, 2001) Personal characteristics: friendly personality (Al-Seghayer, 2017; Brown, 2001) and enthusiasm in teaching (Borg, 2006; Brown, 2001; Guihang & Miao, 2019); 3) Pedagogical features: Teaching informative and interesting classes (Brown, 2001; Walls, Nardi, von Minden, & Hoffman 2002; Miller, 2012; Guihang & Miao, 2019); 4) Cultural features: understanding/acquaintance with the local student community (Brown, 2001; Kirkpatrick, 2010; Liando, 2015); and 5) Linguistic features: advanced communication skills in L2 (Brosh, 1996; Brown, 2001; Nghia, 2015). Since these five categories are perceived by Thai major educational groups as the most important characteristics of successful English teachers, they have thus been used as the key basis for addressing the results gathered from the student questionnaires survey and semi-structured interviews in this study.

Methodology

This study mainly took a qualitative inquiry strategy to investigate the research goal. Conducting a study using a qualitative method of investigation offers an effective way of gathering in-depth personal data on perceptions and of understanding personal views in ways that are difficult to achieve by other methods. However, qualitative research helps participants to travel back and forth in time to recreate the past, view and predict the future (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In general, this approach enables researchers to gain “an insight into the individual’s secret mental and emotional environment” (Hanauer, 2003: 78). In this sense, a semi-structured interview in data collection was used alongside a questionnaire survey of 16 Thai undergraduate tertiary students of English-major based on an initial semi-structured questionnaire analysis of 100 students. The data was analysed by using a qualitative content method. The choice of 16 participants chosen for this study was based simply on the selection criteria of the preliminary participant’s selection criteria emerging from the questionnaire survey. Each respondent was consulted and ethical consent obtained with respect to data collection procedures.

Before the interviews were conducted, audio recording was requested from all participants. Interesting or significant information was also noted during the interview mentioned by the participants and clarification was requested later. The collected data was then analysed and interpreted qualitatively using a content analysis approach.

The audio recordings from the interviews were first transcribed to analyze the data and then saved into Microsoft file. Since the focus of the analysis was on the contents and not the way the respondents responded, the interviews did not contain a transcript of any prosodic features. The interviews were carefully transcribed in Thai and later translated into English. The translated versions were checked and rechecked line by line before intense analysis. The researchers then started to identify emerging research-related themes or patterns by repeatedly reading the transcripts from beginning to end. In this study, a mixed “top-down coding or deductive approach” method was used. A deductive approach implies that preconceived

codes were imposed on the data. For the “bottom-up coding or inductive approach”, the codes emerged from the data. Once the coding was completed, the emerging concepts were modified, reorganized, and cohesively grouped together to demonstrate how they were interrelated in the various categories. As a result, some themes were grouped into groups of sub-themes and those unrelated to the current study discarded.

Findings

Effective English teacher’s characteristics

Within this section, effective English teachers’ characteristics are presented from the learners perspective. As the results below demonstrate, all participants categorize the features of effective English teachers into five categories, listed as: personal features, pedagogical features, cultural sensitivity, linguistic features, and professional features. The participants considered pedagogical characteristics as the most significant among the five characteristics. How the participants interpret each characteristic is described individually in the sections that follow.

Personal characteristics

Patience, in this category, is the most listed. Patience is seen as the most important personal feature of English teachers, especially when dealing with differences in the English language skills of Thai students. In addition, teachers need to recognize that students have different levels of English skills and different learning styles. Some of them are extremely English-skilled, while others are not. Consequently, their students often ask teachers to repeat same thing without visible results many times. They need to relax those who are too lively, gradually push those working slowly and correct them. Patience, as Maneerat stated in the Excerpt 1, is necessary to deal more effectively with different backgrounds of students.

Excerpt 1 (2019, June 5, interview)

Maneerat: Sure, patient first ... The most basic English instruction the students cannot understand so teachers must be patient. Classes here are too big, 40 or 60 students, so you have some students who do not have the capacity to speak English. You’ve got some students with

good English skills. All of them must be taught. You must be extremely patient.

Furthermore, teachers with a passion, commitment and enthusiasm for their subjects are more likely to transfer their knowledge to their students. As demonstrated in Excerpt 2 by Nong, teachers who want to share their skills with their students seem to deliver more interesting lessons that can inspire students to learn.

Excerpt 2 (2019, June 5, interview)

Nong: The most significant feature is ... You ought to love what you teach when you teach anything, whether or not you are teaching engineering or mathematics, because that is the basic important thing.

However, teachers' self-development is another aspect which students also note. Excerpts 3 and 4 demonstrate that their teachers do not believe that they are all conscious of ELT or English. Therefore, they believe that successful English teachers need to refresh and extend their ELT awareness and try to incorporate it in their educational experience.

Excerpt 3 (2019, June 5, interview)

Nong: I believe that the best teachers are lifelong learners too; that they understand they do not all know, they want to learn more all the time. They want to be part of the academy because they're learners themselves, and I think if you're a good teacher, you're also good; you're always going to be a student, and you admit when you don't know something.

Excerpt 4 (2019, June 6, interview)

Adisa: ... teachers must be well-informed and constantly upgrade because the language of English is not always stable, always changes; English teachers therefore also need to develop themselves.

Pedagogical characteristics

Competence in the transfer of knowledge is the main feature identified by participants with regard to pedagogical characteristics. Every instructor should know and appreciate the teaching and learning meth-

ods, each student feels. It is helpful to know how and what teaching methods are appropriate or inappropriate for their teaching practice. As Fatimah and Faizah explain in Excerpts 5 and 6, participants are more likely to feel that the teachers have to be acquainted with their subject and professors. In other words, qualified teachers should know how their teaching skills are passed to their students.

Excerpt 5 (2019, June 6, interview)

Fatimah: Above all, it is very important that you can transfer your knowledge and how to teach because teachers are people who have more experience and skills than students. What the students learn will largely depend...some times...on how the teachers teach them.

Excerpt 6 (2019, June 6, interview)

Faizah: At least they need English knowledge, but the expertise is not so important as teaching techniques. I feel that education is more important than English, because students will not know anything when the teachers have knowledge but cannot transfer their knowledge to students.

Most participants thought the ability of teachers to relate their teaching materials to real-life contexts between their pedagogical features was one of the most important aspects of effective teaching of English. In Excerpt 7, Akrom explains to this extent that efficient teachers are able to show students how to apply their lessons to reality and not just to concentrate on books.

Excerpt 7 (2019, June 6, interview)

Akrom: The teachers of English should link activities or content with real-time situations as part of their learning practices in order to help students to learn how they can use them in their real-life situations. English teachers should focus on how to apply real knowledge; not just teach something that can't be used in real life situations because the students leave it afterwards.

Cultural sensitivity

The student's comprehension of the essence of learning is seen by the participant within the category of cultural sensitivity as the most important feature

of an effective teacher. We see that teachers should know, as is shown in Excerpts 8 and 9, that teaching nonnative students (i.e. Thai students) is the same as teaching native students. They are different in terms of their nature of learning. The disparity causes students in their learning styles to behave differently. It is helpful when teachers understand how their students behave differently. Nevertheless, it must be borne in mind that learners from various contexts cannot behave in the same way for the same reasons.

Excerpt 8 (2019, June 7, interview)

Alan: They need to understand that we're not English native speakers; we're just Thai people trying to learn English. If the teachers recognize this idea, it is easier to run if they do not consider this problem and teach whatever they want, which can be problematic ... They should therefore know who we are and how we learn.

Excerpt 9 (2019, June 7, interview)

Maneerat: You have to understand ... understanding the culture of the students you teach needs to be considered, their shyness towards their participation, their unwillingness to volunteer, their fear of speaking, and making an error. You have to understand why when you teach, why when you ask a question that no one is willing to answer you is because they do not pay attention. You do not need it because they just do not understand you because they're afraid of making mistakes and you need to understand the student's culture.

Linguistic characteristics

All participants agree that effective teachers of English require a high degree of language skills. -English teacher must be able to use English effectively when giving lectures to their students, as described in Excerpts 10 and 11 below. Despite English language skills, they will have trouble teaching.

Excerpt 10 (2019, June 7, interview)

Kwan: The first feature is that the teacher needs to gain knowledge about English language than students. When considering the English language, every aspect of language like pronunciation, grammar, etc. should also be

considered and clearly included in the teachers' teaching based on the different levels of students.

Excerpt 11 (2019, June 9, interview)

Abu: English is important because it could be very hard for teachers to communicate to their students in the classroom when the teachers don't know English.

Professional characteristics

Within this last feature, the two main issues mentioned by the participants are qualifications relevant to an ELT degree and teaching experience. As shown in Excerpt 12, teachers who graduated in ELT are more knowledgeable than those who graduated in other fields.

Excerpt 12 (2019, June 10, interview)

Peter: Like me, I studied abroad for ten years, but that does not mean that simply because I studied English I can teach English. This is because I never learned how to teach. So, I think that teachers need to learn how to teach and not only assume that because they studied abroad, then, they are good English language teachers.

In support of the above argument, Mali (Excerpt 13) and Korakot (Excerpt 14) see the integrity of an English teacher qualifications to better ascertain whether he or she can effectively teach or not.

Excerpt 13 (2019, June 11, interview)

Mali: Required ... Much essential because, like when we're sick we have to go to see the doctor. It is like curing our sickness with someone who has no knowledge of what we are sick of. So, it is necessary for every English teacher to undergo training to be able to claim that he/she can teach English.

Excerpt 14 (2019, June 11, interview)

Korakot: In Thailand, it is necessary for others to accept that you are qualified to teach English if you have the qualifications. It is like the expectation of other Thai English teachers or non-native English teachers who need some kinds of certification to claim that they have been trained to teach English.

Nonetheless, a degree in teaching is not inherently very necessary, especially if teachers have considerable teaching experience. As Joseph and Abu point out in Excerpts 15 and 16, having an ELT certification doesn't guarantee a highly skilled instructor. They believe that real world experience is more important in the teaching process. Therefore, they think that English teachers without an ELT but with teaching experience can be effective teachers of English.

Excerpt 15 (2019, June 12, interview)

Joseph: Without a degree in teaching, but having teaching experience, you have some guarantees of being able to use English.

Excerpt 16 (2019, June 12, interview)

Abu: There is a very important experience ... That's also why hiring agencies try very hard to find teachers with both qualifications and experience to teach us. If the teachers have the expertise in this field, they can better explain to us, the learners, what contents is contained in the textbooks. In my opinion, I believe it is valuable.

■ Discussion

By looking at the teaching characteristics, the results showed that the participants made different judgment on teachers' teaching effectiveness. The participants identified five features of effective English teachers in this current study. Given that the participants' five characteristics correspond to those proposed by Brown (2001) in the effective language teacher framework, they can be used here to indicate whether the teacher can offer effective teaching. Before discussing each category, it should be noted that the order of discussion in no way suggests more important to least important.

In this current study, the first aspect is personal characteristics and is perhaps the most frequently mentioned element of teacher effectiveness in literature (Brown, 2001, Chen & Lin, 2009; Chen, 2012). Day (2004) and Thornton, Peltier, and Hill (2005) suggest that committed teachers are more likely to transfer knowledge to their students. This personal trait helps teachers to prepare carefully, so lessons are more engaging and can inspire students to learn. Establishing close links, be polite, patient, open-minded, and

show empathy for their students (Day, 2004; Park & Lee, 2006), and be versatile both inside and outside (McBer, 2000), are other personality traits generally found in literature. While these characteristics are less frequently mentioned by the students, they are also viewed as essential personality traits by each English teacher, as the study (ibid) indicates that "being near to, rather than distant from, learners[...] improves teachers' ability to do their job well." It thus becomes one of the most important factors in the motivation of students and their participation.

With regard to the second feature: 'pedagogical characteristics'-as observed by Day (2004), which indicates that the only thing which can provide teaching effectiveness is to acquire knowledge of the subject to be taught, and that teachers should also be informed of how to teach the subject. This study explains how teachers transmit their knowledge and relate their educational material to real life contexts as the most important issues discussed by the participants. This finding is based on Brown (2001)'s study that claim a qualified teacher is an individual who is educated. The teacher should understand which teaching methods for each class of its students are acceptable or inappropriate. He/she may employ various teaching strategies, adapt teaching and learning materials in different contexts to meet the needs of students. Teachers who employ varied approaches and practices are more effective than teachers adopting a common approach to teaching (Day, 2004). Consequently, various pedagogical methods are important tools for discussing students' different backgrounds. In Dunne and Wragg (1994: 23), the value "[...]excite and sustain the attention of students[...]" was summarized in "[...] drawing initial interest[...]" from the various approaches the educator might pursue." In addition, an active English teacher may link or relate educational materials to the real-life situations, as suggested by the participants. On this point, Day (2004: 15) says that 'if students can see the connection between what they know and how these can be translated into practice, their commitment to excellence will at best be inconsistent.' Effective educators should therefore show students how to make use of what they learned in real life (Day, 2004; McBer, 2000).

The third important element in efficient learning arising from the research is “Cultural sensitivity.” As mentioned earlier, an effective English teacher needs to know that different students have different languages and styles of learning. Not only teachers who speak Native English (NESTs), but also teachers who speak Nonnative English, should understand these differences as well. While the NNESTs share the same cultural backgrounds as their peers, the contexts are different. In various parts of the country, for instance, Thailand, have different beliefs, religions and nationalities. Various groups of people trained and taught them in various ways. For example, if the NNESTs or the Thai English teachers coming from the South have to teach English to students from different regions (for example from the South or the North or the North East, where different cultures and values exist), they might be able to support them (students). What we discussed here also suggests that teachers who have a good knowledge of their students can anticipate problems before they occur (Day, 2004). They should recognize what practices and teaching and learning materials are acceptable or inappropriate for their learners. In general, they are thus able to create for their students a healthy, relaxed and attractive learning environment. A different background is available to each student and such differences can have an impact on their own behavior. It is therefore a challenge for every teacher to cope with the diverse backgrounds of their students (Clark & Walsh, 2002).

Participants identified “language characteristics” as one of the crucial variables in teaching foreign languages (Barnes & Lock, 2013; Ghasemi & Hashemi, 2011; Park & Lee, 2006). As noted in the section on findings increasing the English language abilities of students to speak, listen, write or read are seen as an important target for every English teacher. The NEST and NNEST must have a high level of competence to pass these English skills more effectively to students because the teacher’s foreign language command allowed both the NEST and the NNEST to use the target languages, adapt classes according to the learners’ experiences and make it possible to use a language in the classroom. In relation to the examples given by the participants in this study, one can conclude

that the more teachers have a high level of English competence, the more successfully they are regarded as teachers of English. The participants, however, have no clear idea what a high degree of language skill actually means during this research. In addition, Wichadee (2010) and Park and Lee (2006) conducted a study that investigated teachers’ views of the features of effective English teachers. They discovered that the language skills of effective teachers are the most important feature. Therefore, the possibility to speak English can be believed to play a key role in understanding the success or weakness in ELT of teachers (Brown, 2001; Day, 2004). When, however, students seem to demonstrate a low level of skill in English, teachers must first increase their knowledge of the global importance of English and also exercises to assist them in achieving a sufficient level of English skills.

The last element that most participants identify is “Professional features.” This characteristic can be supported by different studies carried out by many educational scholars (Borg, 2006; Brown, 2001; Lee, 2010; Miller, 2012). Such studies show that “career characteristics” are one of the primary determinations of the teaching skills of an individual. The participants see that successful English teachers must have finished their ELT degree, as suggested in the previous section. When we take this in more depth, however, we can see that most student participants were very versatile with respect to the educational background of the teachers. In other words, they did not understand the value of teachers as long as the teachers had ELT experience, to complete or to complete an ELT degree. For English teachers, however, an ELT degree is still relevant as it is seen as a sign that some participants see as a good teacher. Some would conclude that some teachers are not eligible without an ELT degree.

Based on this discussion, the characteristics of an effective teacher in the English language cannot be evaluated in compliance with teaching and productive teaching concepts without analyzing the nationalities of students, their first language or their physical appearance. Alternatively, it should be judged based on its context (Llurda, 2009). Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (2006) proposed the following statement to support this particular issue:

"[...] TESOL strongly opposes discrimination against nonnative English speakers in the field of English language teaching. Rather, English language proficiency, teaching experience, and professionalism should be assessed along on a continuum of professional preparation. All English language educators should be proficient in English regardless of their native languages, but English language proficiency should be viewed as only one criterion in evaluating a teacher's professionalism. Teaching skills, teaching experience, and professional preparation should be given as much weight as language proficiency".

The explanation clearly states that a qualified English teacher has no connection with his or her nativeness or nationality. A teacher born in a country where English is the primary tool for communication is not automatically a teacher of English. Qualified English teachers should be assess on how they prepare to be a qualified English teacher and their linguistic skills, educational background, education and experience. It is unfair to judge a teacher based on who they are, their mother tongue or their ethnicity since these factors do not influence their teaching skills.

■ Conclusion

Even if the interview data shows the five characteristics of effective teachers, there is no evidence that one aspect is better than another. The conclusion is that effective teachers of English need various characteristics. An effective teacher of English, in other words, has no unique feature. However, the above five features do not shape a final list of features of an effective English teachers, however, all five are similar to most effective teachers ' pedagogical repertoire, although the strength of the agreement is different from previous studies. Specifically, every educational stakeholder ought to be aware that there is no connection between the native history of an English teacher and his or her language level. Put differently, NESTs or NNESTs are viewed not as a language proficiency indicator, but rather as markers of language skills. Speaking English as the native speaker is not mandatory and cannot be used to judge whether someone is a good English teacher. Whatever their

ethnicity, first language or physical appearance, every English teacher has an equal chance to succeed, regardless of where they come from. In order to determine whether teachers are knowledgeable in English, various considerations, such as teaching qualifications and previous experience, should be considered. The language skills of NEST and NNESTs should therefore not be measured, and native English skills should not automatically be attained. On the other hand, the language skills of each English teacher should be evaluated individually by using the most appropriate interventions techniques or standards for the teacher or background concerned.

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