Arab Tertiary Students' Perceptions of Effective Teachers

Dr. Saleh Saafin

University of Sharjah, UAE

Abstract

The aim of this descriptive study is to identify Arab tertiary students' perceptions of the qualities and practices of teachers whom they judge to be effective. The data was collected from 136 Arab freshman students attending the intensive English program in the University of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to prepare them for their career programs. A content analysis of the data revealed a set of perceived characteristics and practices that were ranked according to their frequency rate. These results show that although teachers' ability to teach and help students understand are seen to be essential, certain human aspects of teachers and their attitudes toward their students are seen as crucial for judging their effectiveness. These Arab students considered the human element of their teachers as a very important component of their effectiveness.

Introduction

Improving learning outcomes is one of the important goals that teachers and educational institutions wish to achieve, and research indicates that effective teaching is one of the factors that influence the quality of learning (Perkins & Solomon, 1989). In order to continue improving teaching effectiveness, further research should be conducted in this field. Muijs & Reynolds (2001) write: "... teaching needs to be firmly research based, as only this approach will maximize the effectiveness of all teachers and the learning and development of all learners" (p. 211). A great deal of research has been done on effective teaching; there is, however, considerable theoretical interest in investigating the characteristics of effective teachers within Arab culture. This study aims at providing an understanding of effective teaching from the perspective of Arab undergraduate students.

The vast majority of higher education teachers in the UAE are contract teachers from other countries. The performance of teachers is evaluated annually and students' feedback is a major part of teacher evaluation. Evaluations are used to assist managers in making decisions regarding promotion, continuity and contract renewal. In addition, student evaluation of teacher performance is a source of diagnostic feedback to teachers and helps curriculum designers to revise the teaching materials.

Students can be positively or negatively affected by effective or ineffective teaching, and the focus in this study is on the students' perceptions of effective teaching. The criterion of effectiveness applied in this study is the degree of qualities and practices of effective teachers that are esteemed by tertiary students.

Many researchers believe that students are capable of evaluating teachers' performance and that their feedback can be useful in improving teaching effectiveness and developing course content. Ramsden (1991) believes that students are an important source of information about teacher effectiveness, and they are capable of identifying effective teaching characteristics from their perspective. Jackson et al. (1999) similarly believe that students are a convenient choice for raters, and their 'candid reaction' can be useful in refining teaching styles and course structures. Marsh (1987) also concludes that students

are capable of distinguishing between effective teachers and bad teachers. He contends that student evaluations are the only indicator of teaching effectiveness whose validity has been thoroughly established. It is true that students may deliberately give wrong negative or positive feedback about a certain teacher for personal reasons. However, this is not likely to happen when students are asked for research purposes to identify the characteristics of effective teachers regardless of who those teachers are.

Effective Teaching Research

A great deal of research has been conducted on effective teaching. However, one of the challenges that effective teaching research has been experiencing is a lack of appropriate consistency in its findings. Roberts (1998) indicates that there is a problem in defining good teaching, and points out that the literature on effective teaching suggests that there is no particular set of strategies or practices which can be claimed as effective. Patrick & Smart (1998) similarly state, "While many researchers have formulated working definitions of effective teaching, with a noticeable overlap in definitions, it is not certain that any one researcher has effectively tapped the whole domain of effective teaching" (p. 165). Effective teaching research findings show this kind of overlapping as well as the discrepancies.

Table 1: Findings of various studies on effective teaching characteristics.

Guskey and Easton, 1983 characteristics and behaviours of effective teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • spending time planning their courses, objectives and criteria • expressing a positive regard for students • encouraging student involvement • providing students regular feedback on their learning progress
Murray, 1991 dimensions of effective teaching behaviours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • enthusiasm • clarity of explanation • rapport
Ramsden, 1992 principles of effective teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • explaining things clearly • giving appropriate assessment • encouraging independence and active engagement • setting clear goals and intellectual challenge • being respectful • being willing to learn from students
Murdoch, 1997 features of good classroom practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • presenting various language activities • using different teaching methods • taking into consideration students' interests • giving students the chance to interact and ask/answer questions

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • planning well • encouraging student responsibility for language learning
Patrick & Smart, 1998 factors of teacher effectiveness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • respect for students • ability to challenge students • organization and presentation skills
Berlin, 2000 themes of effective teaching	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • taking into consideration the individual differences of learners in English classes • making connections to the real world • being respectful • having a sense of humor • having love that students believe to have a connection to learning
Ayres et. al., 2004 factors of teachers' success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teachers' relationships with students • teachers' classroom practices • the students themselves • faculty cooperation
Tang et. al., 2005 qualities of effective teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • professional competence • interpersonal relationship • personality characteristics • teaching ability

As we can see in Table 1, there are similarities and differences in these findings. Most of these studies agree that effective teachers can help students understand, have a good rapport with students and involve students in various classroom activities. However, the overall findings are not consistent. Although there is no clear explanation for why a higher level of consensus on the components of effective teaching could not be reached, there are some issues that should be highlighted in this regard.

Firstly, there are no standard or common terms for similar concepts that researchers can use. For example, providing clear instruction that helps students understand is described by different researchers using different titles such as *conveying knowledge*, *explaining things clearly*, *teaching ability*, *clear instructional presentation*, *providing understandable explanations*, etc. This sometimes makes it difficult to decide whether or not such terms match.

Secondly, different studies investigate learners' perspectives of effective teaching in various subjects such as mathematics, English, history, nursing, etc. These subjects have different natures and as a result students' views on teaching effectiveness might be different from one subject to another. For example, language teaching is different from other subjects in that teaching a language does not only involve teaching new information and explaining linguistic items, but also involves other social aspects such as classroom interactions and various activities through which students can use the language in

different contexts. Accordingly, student perceptions of effective language teaching may sometimes differ from perceptions of effective teaching in other subjects. Some characteristics of good teaching may lend themselves to all subjects, but some others may be particular to specific fields.

Thirdly, learners have different backgrounds, experiences, cultural environments, and mental capacities, and as a result they see things through different lenses and learn things in different ways. Therefore teaching methods that suit one learner may not necessarily be as effective as they are for somebody else, and in consequence, this may influence the perceptions of learners as to what exemplifies effective teaching (Williams & Burden 1997).

Fourthly, data in effective teaching research has been collected using different research methods. The studies that follow a quantitative approach use various instruments whose contents do not always match. Tagomori and Bishop (1995) found that the vast majority of instruments reviewed in their survey contained evaluation items which were ambiguous, vague, subjectively stated, or did not correlate with classroom teaching behaviour. This makes it difficult to compare the findings of studies that used different instrument contents, to reach a consensus on what makes teachers effective, and to have findings of high validity.

Fifthly, the nature of various assessment scales used in the quantitative research conducted on effective teaching may influence the responses of the subjects, and this also adds to the lack of clarity on the perceptions of effective teaching. Poor research methodology and design are more likely to lead respondents to select particular responses that the researcher has chosen to include, resulting in questionable conclusions. In other words, the design of assessment scales can lead students to respond in a certain way. E.g., a student is more likely to respond positively to items such as:

An effective teacher is the teacher who respects you.

An effective teacher is the teacher who is well prepared.

An effective teacher is the teacher who helps you inside and outside the classroom.

Sixthly, there is a concern regarding the independence of scale measures used in student evaluations. Shelvin et al. (2000) finds that a 'halo effect' occurs in the completion of student evaluation of teaching ratings. Also, Darby (2007) finds that halo effect does occur with Likert-style evaluations while it does not with open-ended course evaluations. She concludes that the responses on the Likert scales and open-ended responses do not match. She notes that, "Students on the courses who, on the rating scales, say they like the presenters do not necessarily say they like the presenters when they give open-ended responses" (p. 53).

Seventhly, research questionnaires are best applied when they are developed or modified to suit the values and culture of the country in which they are used, but this is not always so. For example, in the Hong Kong context which has similarities to the UAE situation, Pratt et al (1999) state that, "The use of questionnaires developed in other countries to gather student opinion regarding the quality of teaching in Hong Kong or China may result in the imposition of other cultures' values regarding appropriate roles, responsibilities, and relationships for teachers in higher education" (p. 242). In this case, the existing scales might not measure students' perceptions very well, nor be culturally sensitive.

In the light of the above, it seems that the evaluation of effective teaching lends itself better to the qualitative research method which may enable the participants of the study to express their perspective of effective teaching freely without imposing the researchers' opinion on respondents or influencing their responses. It also helps in investigating the understanding or perceptions of effective teaching, which might differ from one person to another. In his defence of subjectivist research, Gentilucci (2004)

argues that interpreting students' behaviours subjectively would help researchers to better understand students' feelings and actions that an objective paradigm fails to investigate adequately. Similarly, Kobrynowiez and Biernat's (1997) indicate that students have a better chance to express themselves in open ended evaluations than Likert style forms.

Method

Participants

136 Arab undergraduate students from the University of Sharjah took part in this qualitative study on a voluntary basis during their first academic year. Sixty-three students were female and seventy-three were male; ages ranged between 18 and 20. They were attending an intensive English program in the English Language Center of the University of Sharjah that prepared them for their career fields which were taught in English.

Procedures

The participants were asked to write their views on teachers they had perceived as effective. The prompt was translated into Arabic and the participants' responses were given in Arabic. This was to avoid language obstacles and make sure that they had no difficulties in expressing their ideas. The prompt was shown to an Arabic/English bilingual teacher in order to make sure it was translated accurately. No more ideas or suggestions were given to the students so that they should not be influenced by the researcher's ideas, with the goal of being able to collect authentic students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness. The students were given 20 minutes to record their responses. Most participants responded in freehand writing in a list form.

Results

The content of the qualitative data collected was analyzed and categorised into thematic groups of teacher characteristics and practices. The most frequent qualities and practices that emerged from the data analysis are presented below in order of frequency.

1. Treats Students with Respect

Showing respect to students was found to be the most frequently mentioned characteristic of effective teachers in the categories identified by the students. This quality was mentioned by more than 61% of all students.

"When teachers respect their students, the students become more responsible."

"He does not make fun of the students who answer questions wrongly."

2. Is Flexible and Willing to Compromise

About 50% of students mentioned that good teachers were cooperative and flexible. They perceived that effective teachers were willing to reach a compromise with their students. They mainly talked about teachers' lenience in implementing the rules in certain situations rather than being tough and strict.

"He should be forgivable and avoid implementing the rules except in very serious cases. For example, when a student comes to class late, the teacher should not mark him late or absent before he listens to his excuse and after that he can decide."

3. Is Helpful

Being helpful and caring for students was mentioned by more than 48% of students. The students indicated that good teachers are those who interacted with them at an informal level, listened to them and gave them advice.

"He spends some time on giving advice and guidance to students and shares his own experience with them rather than spending all the time on teaching."

They also indicated that effective teachers would not limit their help to academic issues.

"He makes the student feel that he cares for him not only in terms of academic issues but also in terms of his personal life."

Others said that teachers should help students even outside classrooms.

"Teachers must help those students who need help inside and outside the classroom."

4. Is Friendly with Students

About 45% of all students valued this attribute and considered it very necessary in the teaching and learning context. The participants indicated that treating students as friends or family members helped in creating a warm family atmosphere that had a positive reflection on their learning and made them better willing to be taught by their teachers.

"Teachers should treat students in a good way, like brothers. This will encourage students to work harder and make students more self-confident because it will put them in an excellent family atmosphere."

5. Has a Sense of Humor

Approximately 45% of all students said that it was necessary to have humour and fun in class. This, together with good treatment, helped in creating a comfortable class atmosphere and making classes more interesting and students more attentive.

"Teachers should be serious and at the same time have a sense of humor. These two qualities complete each other. In order for the teacher to reach the minds of students he should first reach their hearts."

6. Helps Students Understand

Helping students to understanding is a key issue in the teaching process. About 45% of the students mentioned that good teachers are those who provide understandable explanations. They prescribed some specific practices that they found useful in helping them understand. They included the following in the order of importance:

- a. Using a variety of teaching methods;

"Teachers should explain the lesson in more than one way so that students can understand it in a good way."

- b. Checking understanding;

"Good teachers ask questions to make sure students understood the lesson."

- c. Willing to explain again;

"Effective Teachers would explain again if any student doesn't understand."

- d. Teaching at students' knowledge level and pace;

"Teachers should teach at the students' level in order for them to understand."

"Effective teachers do not go fast in explaining the lessons. They slow down so that students can understand as much as possible."

- e. Giving homework regularly;

"He should give homework so that students may not become lazy."

- f. Giving exams regularly;

"He should give exams from time to time to make sure that students remember what was taught."

- g. Giving ample exercises and practice

"He should give a lot of activities and exercises that help students understand the lesson."

- h. Giving examples

"Teachers should use examples when they explain and clarify all unclear meanings."

7. Gives Students the Chance to Speak and Ask Questions

Enabling students to express their ideas and ask questions was mentioned by more than 30% of the students.

"He gives the students the chance to express their opinions and participate in class discussions."

"She should be ready to take all students' questions and answer them."

8. Is Dedicated

More than 25% of the students indicated that dedication was one of the characteristics of effective teachers. The most common aspect of dedication for students was investing class time in teaching and learning.

"An effective teacher is the one who does not waste class time on things that are irrelevant to our lesson."

Another aspect of teachers' dedication that the participants identified was doing their best to help their students learn.

"He should exert a lot of efforts so that he can benefit his students and help them understand the lesson."

A third aspect was that good teachers would demonstrate concern for their students' learning.

"Honesty is important in doing the job. Some teachers go to the class only to give a lesson, and as soon the class is over they leave the classroom without caring whether students understood or not."

9. Is Fair

Fairness was mentioned by about 20% of the students as a characteristic of effective teachers. The students mentioned that effective teachers are fair with their students in different ways. Treating students equally is one way good teachers can be fair.

"He should be fair and impartial regardless how important a student's family is."

Involving weak students in classroom activities is another aspect of teachers' fairness.

"In every class there are weak students and strong students. Many teachers give their attention to strong students and overlook weaker ones. This is wrong because they destroy weak students and make them lazier."

10. Is a Role Model

Many students mentioned that effective teachers should be a role model for them in various aspects.

"I think that a good teacher should be a good example for students in everything: his appearance, elegance, eloquence and conduct so that he can attract students."

11. Is Knowledgeable of Her/His Subject

Teachers' knowledge of the subject he/she teaches was also perceived as one of the characteristics of good teachers. Student expected good teachers to master the subject and teach it with full confidence.

"He should have a grasp of the subject he teaches so that he can answer all students' questions."

12. Is Patient

Some students indicated that patience is one of the characteristics of good teachers. They showed patience in helping students to learn.

"He is patient and does not get angry for example because a student did not understand. He should know that students came here to learn and he needs to be patient in order to help students understand."

Some others said that good teachers are tolerant and show self control in dealing with their students.

"Patience factor is the most important one. Some students are careless and they just wanted to disturb the teacher."

13. Smiles

Some students indicated that good teachers smile.

"Smiling has a good effect on the relationship between teachers and students. Smiling is the key for success."

Discussion

The characteristics of effective teachers identified in this study can be categorized under two main themes: interpersonal rapport with students and instructional skills. The interpersonal practices and personal characteristics of the first theme are in line with previous research (Guskey & Easton, 1983;

Ayres et al, 2004; Ramsden, 1992; Patrick & Smart, 1998; Tang et. al., 2005). In this study, students identified a wide range of teachers' affective qualities, and gave many of them more weight than the teachers' instructional practices. Should teachers not establish good interpersonal rapport with students, then they are likely to be less accepted by students and less likely to be regarded as effective teachers. Teachers and students are partners in the teaching and learning process and if one of these parties does not accept the other, this process will definitely be negatively affected.

Learning a foreign language is not an easy task and is sometimes frustrating, boring and threatening for many students. In this study participants made a clear relationship between teachers' interpersonal skills and their motivation to learn. The findings show that creating a friendly, enjoyable and supportive environment is essential in teaching and learning English effectively. These Arab students felt that a warm family atmosphere within which teachers are friendly, caring and humorous and students are relaxed, happy and motivated helps them to learn English better.

Teachers' flexibility and willingness to adjust rather than being too strict was found to be a significant factor in good teachers' interpersonal relationships. This kind of quality can be related to the local Arab culture that values flexibility in dealing with others. This may explain why this 'cultural' quality of effective teachers is not common in other research into effective teaching. Flexibility appeared to be an important component of establishing a good rapport with students in the UAE context. Nevertheless, although this is a quality favoured by students in this academic context and appears to have a positive effect on the relationship between students and teachers and the learning atmosphere, teachers may not be able to be flexible without limitations. They may be flexible in certain matters as long as that does not affect their credibility and does not seriously violate the regulations of the institutions they work for.

The second theme of effective teaching emerging in this study is instructional skills, which is consistent with previous research studies (Murdoch, 1997; Ayres et al, 2004; Ramsden, 1992; Patrick & Smart 1998; Murray, 1991; Tang et. al., 2005). Adequate teaching is the core of this theme. Students identified several teaching skills and practices that demonstrate teaching competence. One of these skills that students put a lot of emphasis on and considered as a major criterion for judging teaching effectiveness is teachers' ability to help students understand. They prescribed a number of teaching practices that they found helpful in understanding such as using a variety of teaching methods, checking students' understanding, teaching at students' level and pace and giving a lot of exercises and language practice.

Another teaching practice that students highlighted is teachers' helpfulness. Effective teachers are willing to help students both within and outside the classroom, address their learning needs, listen to their personal concerns, and give them appropriate advice. These aspects of teachers' assistance are not only appreciated by students as a friendly manner, but also as a learning support that gives them a better chance to interact informally and practise English freely in more realistic situations away from any 'candid' audience.

A third instructional practice that the students highlighted was that effective teachers would give them the chance to speak in English, the target language, and express their feelings, ideas and opinions. This is consistent with the findings of Murdoch (1997) who concludes that providing 'space' for students to interact and ask/answer questions to be one of the features of good classroom practice. The students in this study indicated repeatedly that teachers should not teach all the time and considered the teachers who do that as ineffective. According to them, talking or explaining all the time makes classes boring. To learn English more effectively, there should be time for them to practice it. In fact, using the target language is not only helpful in learning it, but also students find it interesting to speak the new language they are exerting a lot of time and effort to learn.

The participants in this study showed very little interest in challenge or strictness, which may indicate that the students prefer 'easy' teachers. This raises the concern that using student evaluations in deciding contract renewal and promotions, for example, should be undertaken with caution. This is not to underestimate the usefulness of students' feedback, but to conclude that the analytical perspective of an experienced supervisor in such situations is crucial to avoid a situation in which an 'easy' but ineffective teacher may win a contract renewal or a promotion over a 'difficult' but effective teacher.

To sum up, this study empirically investigated Arab students' perceptions by following a qualitative approach. This allowed the respondents to express themselves freely about what made teachers effective. As a result, it provided a clearer understanding of Arab students' perceptions of effective teachers that can be a foundation for further research to determine whether Arab students' expectations are similar with other broad samples. It also concludes that Arab students highly appreciate the 'human' element in the English language teaching and learning process. Effective teaching skills are valued by them, but they are deemed not to be enough to make teachers effective. In addition, the study introduced specific practices of good teaching that could be more useful and easier to adopt than general descriptions.

It should be made clear that teachers have different personalities and what makes one teacher good may not be appropriate for another (Williams & Burden, 1997). Therefore, it is necessary to emphasize that the findings of this study do not work as a simple specification for all teachers to follow, nor for supervisors to solely rely upon, but rather as a prompt for reflection on one's own practice, and an insight into the complex cultural factors impacting on student evaluations of teachers.

References

- Ayres, P., Sawyer, W. & Dinham, S. (2004). Effective teaching in the context of a Grade 12 High Stakes External Examination in New South Wales, Australia. *British Educational Research Journal* 30, pp. 141-165.
- Berlin, L. N. (2000). *Toward a Working Definition of Effective Language Instruction in the Multicultural ESL Classroom*. Unpublished PhD thesis, The University of Arizona.
- Darby, J. A. (2007). Are Course Evaluations Subject to a Halo Effect? *Research in Education*, 77, pp. 46-55.
- Gentilucci, J. L. (2004). Improving School Learning: the Student Perspective. *The Educational Forum*, 68(2), pp. 133-143.
- Guskey, T., & Easton, J. (1983). The Characteristics of Very Effective Teachers in Urban Community Colleges. *Community/Junior College Quarterly*, 7(3), pp. 265-274.
- Jackson, D. L., Teal, C.R., Raines, S.J., Nansel, T.R., Force, R.C & Burdsal, C.A. (1999). The Dimensions of Students' Perceptions of Teaching Effectiveness. *Educational and Psychological Measurement*, 59(4), pp. 545-720.
- Kobrynowiez, D., & Biernat, M. (1997). Decoding Subjective Evaluations: How Stereotypes Provide Shifting Standards. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 33, pp. 579-601.
- Marsh, H. W. (1987). Students' Evaluations of University Teaching: Research Findings, Methodological Issues, and Directions for Future Research. *International Journal of Educational Research*, 11(3), pp. 253-388.

- Muijs, D., & Reynolds, D. (2001). *Effective Teaching; Evidence and Practice*. London: Paul Chapman Publishing.
- Murdoch, G. (1997). What Makes a Good English Language Teacher? U.A.E. Perspectives. In Coombe, C. and Troudi, S. (Eds). *Conference Proceedings: Tradition and Innovation*, 11, pp. 96-108. UAE: TESOL Arabia Publications.
- Murray, H. G. (1991). Effective Teaching Behaviors in the College Classroom. In J.C. Smart (Ed.). *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research*, 6, pp.135-172. New York: Agathon Press.
- Patrick, J. & Smart, R. M. (1998). An Empirical Evaluation of Teacher Effectiveness: the Emergence of Three Critical Factors. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 23(2), pp.165-178.
- Perkins, D. N. & Solomon, G. (1989). Are cognitive skills context bound? *Educational Researcher*, 18(1), pp. 16-25.
- Pratt, D. D., Kelly, M. & Wong, W. S. S. (1999). Chinese Conceptions of 'Effective Teaching' in Hong Kong: towards Culturally Sensitive Evaluation of Teaching. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 18(4), pp. 241-258.
- Ramsden, P. (1991). Performance Indicator of Teaching Quality in Higher Education: the Course Experience Questionnaire. *Studies in Higher Education*, 16, pp. 129-150.
- Ramsden, P. (1992). *Learning to Teach in Higher Education*. London: Routledge.
- Roberts, J. (1998). *Language Teacher Education*. London: Arnold.
- Shelvin, M., Banyard, P., Davies, M. & Griffiths, M. (2000). The Validity of Student Evaluation of Teaching in Higher Education: Love Me, Love My Lectures? *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 25(4), pp. 397-405.
- Tagomori, H. T. & Bishop, L. A. (1995). Student Evaluation of Teaching. Flaws in the Instruments. *Thought and Action*, 11, pp. 63-78.
- Tang, F.I., Chou, S.M. & Chiang, H.H. (2005). Students' Perceptions of Effective and Ineffective Clinical Instructors. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 44(4), pp.187-192.
- Williams, M. & Burden R. (1997). *Psychology for Language Teachers; a Social Constructivist Approach*. Cambridge: CUP.

Author

Saleh Saafin has a PhD in Education in the field of TEFL from the University of Exeter in England. He teaches in the English language Center, University of Sharjah. He has more than 20 years of EFL teaching experience at intensive English programs at a university level. He is an Arabic native speaker from Palestine who, like the vast majority of English as a Foreign language students, learned EFL in state schools in his native country. His interest is effective EFL teaching and learning.