

The Relationship between Iranian English language Teachers' and Learners' Gender and their Perceptions of an Effective English Language Teacher

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Abstract

In this study English language teachers and learners engaged in teaching and learning of English in Iranian universities, high schools and private language institutes were asked about characteristics of an effective English language teacher. The aim of the study was to investigate whether male and female teachers and learners of English hold different views on characteristics of an effective English language teacher. For this purpose a questionnaire comprising 46 questions on a 1 to 5 Likert Scale was administered to 59 English language teachers and 215 learners of English. The results indicated significant difference between the responses of male and female participants in both teacher and learner groups on some characteristics of an effective English Language teacher.

Keywords: English Language teacher, English language learner, Gender, Effective English language teacher

1. Introduction

Teachers in general and English language teachers in particular play a fundamental role in their learners' learning and academic achievement. As previous research has revealed, effective and efficient learning on the part of the students highly depends on teachers and the actions they take in their classes (Markley, 2004). The way teachers behave and the methodologies they exploit in their teaching, to a large extent, depend on their perceptions of effective teaching and their beliefs about teacher efficacy (Ghaith & Shaaban, 1999). It also affects the way they understand and organize instruction (Chacón, 2005). Therefore, the teachers' perceptions of an effective teacher can highly influence their teaching and as a result their learners' learning (Dembo & Gibson, 1985; Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000). Students also bring their own beliefs about learning and their perceptions about effective teachers into classroom and their beliefs seem to have obvious relevance to their expectations of the course (Horwitz, 1988). Moreover, there seems to be a relationship between the gender of the learners and their expectations of an effective teacher (Ogden, Chapman, & Linward, 1994). It is therefore the purpose of this study to investigate characteristics of effective English language teachers from the perspectives of male and female Iranian English language learners and teachers.

It is worthwhile to study the perceptions of teachers and learners about effective English language teachers in the Iranian context for two main reasons. The first one is that teachers' perceptions of efficacy plays an important role in their decision making in the classroom (Pintrich, 1990) as well as their professional practice and consequently affects the learning on the part of their students. Methodologies exploited by the teachers are reflection of how they conceptualize an effective teacher and their perceptions usually leads their actions in classroom in turn (Pajares, 1992). This issue becomes of great importance in Iranian context since language learning mainly takes place in formal language classroom (Kariminia & Salehizadeh, 2007). The second reason for undertaking such a study is to get informed about the perceptions of language learners about an effective English language teacher as their perceptions also can have an immense impact on their learning. Moreover, studies of this kind in contexts like Iran that the culture of teaching is primarily teacher-centred (Noora, 2008), in fact, serve as a needs analysis. It provides the learners with an opportunity to have their say and express their expectations of an effective teacher as well as helping the teachers to improve the quality of their teaching to meet their students' needs. In other words, in the process of teaching and learning getting informed about the opinions of learners will help teachers to better live up to their expectations (Babai Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009).

After a brief review of the related literature, description of the procedures involved in conducting the study is presented. Then main findings of the study are discussed and key issues emerging from the present study and suggestions for continuing research into this topic conclude the paper.

2. Literature Review

Studies which have taken gender of the teachers and learners into account have usually focused on ratings and evaluations that male and female teachers have received from the students (Basow & Silberg, 1987; Feldman, 1992, 1993; Mason, Steagall, & Fabritiust, 1995; Wachtel, 1998). Some others have also studied either how male and female students have been rated by their teachers (Jaeger & Frcijo, 1975; Levine, 1977) or the roles of gender in teachers' assessments of students' work (Carson, 2001). However, few studies have investigated characteristics of effective teachers as viewed by male and female teachers and students. The few studies that have focused on this topic are either on perspectives of teachers or learners' and there is almost no particular study focusing on characteristics of effective English language teachers from the perspectives of both teachers and learners. Makarova and Ryan (1998) investigated gender-specific features of students' perception of their teachers in Japan. They used a questionnaire to study the differences between female and male university English majors' expectations about teachers of English. Their findings revealed that qualities considered highly important for effective English teachers by male learners were not considered unimportant by females. In a similar vein, no cases were found to be considered highly important by female students while being considered unimportant by their male counterparts. However, they noticed that there was statistically significant variation in the relative importance of some items. For example, female students more than males believed that good English language teachers create a stress free and non-threatening learning environment. They also rated having good pronunciation and making the lessons interesting higher than males did. However, male students less than the female students believed that not giving much homework to students was a characteristic of good teachers (Makarova & Ryan, 1998).

Ogden et al (1994) conducted a study to investigate characteristics of good/ effective teachers as viewed by students. They found that some behaviours and characteristics that the learners expected from their teachers depended on their gender. Females more than males believed that effective teachers were understanding, enthusiastic, organized and creative. However, males more than females regarded characteristics like being fair, responsible and humorous as well as communicating well with students as making a good teacher.

In a similar study characteristics of best and worst teachers as experienced by pre-service teachers were investigated (Aagaard & Skidmore, 2002). Although there were not much difference between how male and female to-be teachers described best and worst teachers, females were reported to be concerned about teaching methodologies as characterising good teachers more than males. However, males noted lack of ethical behaviour in characteristics of worst teachers more than females did.

In an attempt to investigate characteristics of outstanding university professors from the perspective of undergraduates students studying 24 different subjects, Smith, Medendorp, Ranck, Morrison and Kopfman (1994) found that general categories of ideal teachers' characteristics were conceptually important for the students. In their study general prototypical characteristics of outstanding professors were divided into three main groups of personal, interpersonal and class characteristics. Both males and females ranked class characteristics as highly important for ideal teachers. However, they differed significantly in ranking the two other general categories in salience. Females placed more importance on general interpersonal and behaviour category as well as specific category of being approachable more than male students. Males, on the other hand, valued general category of personal characteristics and particular attributes of being knowledgeable and having sense of humour more than females did.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

Participants of this study were selected as a convenience sample. They were divided into two major groups of teachers and learners of English. Each group was divided into two subgroups of males and females as well. There were 59 participants in the teachers' group who were 29 males and 30 females. Seventy eight of the 215 students participating in this study were males and the rest of 137 were females. The teachers were practicing English language teaching at different Iranian universities, high schools or private language institutes. The students were also university students majoring in English language and literature or English language teaching, high school students or were engaged in learning English as a foreign language in private language institutes. English was the foreign language for all the participants.

3.2. Instrument

A tailor-made paper and pencil questionnaire was used for the purpose of data collection in this study. The questionnaire (Appendix A) which was administered along with a covering letter was developed in English and

Persian. Both versions were revised 4 times with the help of colleagues and peers before being used in a pilot study to investigate how different items functioned and to find out whether there was a need to revise, add or drop some items. After adding the items emerging from comments received from pilot testing, the questionnaire comprised of 46 statements about the characteristics of an effective English language teacher that the participants were asked to express their agreement or disagreement to them based on a five-point (strongly disagree, disagree, no idea, agree, strongly agree) Likert Scale.

3.3. Data collection and procedure

English language professors/teachers teaching at the University of Urmia, high schools and language institutes were contacted by the author in order to administer the questionnaire. The questionnaire was also sent by email to 550 other teachers including all academic members of English language departments of Tehran University, Shahid Beheshti University, Tarbiyat Modares University, University of Shiraz, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, University of Semnan, University of Kashan, University of Sistan and Baloochestan, University of Yazd, University of Arak, University of Shahrekord, University of Isfahan, University of Ilam and Razi University of Kermanshah. In the long run 274 questionnaires out of a total of 400, distributed among the English language teachers and learners, with a response rate of 34.25 % came back.

The questionnaire was also given to all freshmen, sophomore, junior, senior and MA students majoring in English Language and Literature or TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) at English language department of University of Urmia, all Pre-university students in Razi and Fazilat high schools of Adjabshir (a city in East Azarbaijan Province) and a cohort of learners at Iran Language Institute (ILI) and (Jahade Daneshgahi) JD language institutes of Urmia.

The questionnaire was administered at the beginning of the spring semester of academic year 2008-2009 and it took about 20 minutes to complete it. All the teachers and the university students were given the English version of the questionnaire. The learners studying English in language institutes were provided with both English and Persian versions of the questionnaire and they were given the option to answer the one they preferred. The high school students were provided with the Persian version of the questionnaire. Even in the English version of the questionnaire, the subjects were allowed to answer the open ended questions in Persian if they so desired.

3.4. Data analysis

The questionnaires coming from the participants who had strongly agreed or disagreed to *all items* were excluded. Then, the following values were assigned to responses provided for Likert Scale items: Strongly Agree = 5, Agree = 4, No Idea = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1. Then the mean values and standard deviations (SD) for each item were calculated using the MatLab statistical package. To compare the differences between male and female students and male and female teachers in their views on the characteristics of an effective English language teacher, the statistical analysis technique of Wilcoxon's rank-sum was applied (Dickinson Gibbons & Chakraborti, 2003; Mackey & Gass, 2005).

3.5. Findings

A number of discrepancies were found between the perceptions of male and female teachers and male and female language learners on some characteristics of an effective English language teacher. The findings related to each group are presented in the following sections.

3.5.1. Items answered differently by male and female teachers

Male teacher more than female teachers counted ability to write in English well as characterizing an effective English language teacher. They also agreed more strongly than female teacher that following syllabus tightly, sticking to administrative rules and regulations and teaching English in students' mother tongue are the qualities that an effective English language teacher must possess. Female teachers, on the other hand, agreed more strongly than the male teachers that an effective English language teacher should be able to pronounce English Well. Table 1 illustrates the items answered significantly differently by male and female teachers.

3.5.2. Items answered differently by male and female learners

Responses of the male and female learners were significantly different to eight items out of forty six. Similar to female teachers, female learners agreed more strongly than their male counterparts that an effective English language teacher should pronounce English well. They also agreed more than male learners that assigning homework, teaching English in English and alleviating students' anxiety in classes are characteristics that make an English language teacher effective. Their responses to two more items were also significantly different from those of male learners. Females more than males agreed that effective English language teachers provide learners

with opportunities to use English through meaningful tasks and activities and try to arouse the learners motivation for learning English.

The only item that male learners had agreed with more than female learners was about the medium of instruction. While the females had counted teaching English in English as a characteristic of an effective English teacher, males had conversely agreed more than females that effective English language teachers should teach English in students' mother tongue. Table 2 shows the areas of difference between responses of male and female learners.

4. Discussion and conclusion

As findings of the present study indicate, male and female Iranian teachers and learners of English hold different views toward some characteristics of an effective English language teacher. Considering the dearth of studies in language teaching context on the relationship between teachers' and learners' gender and their perceptions of an effective English language teacher, this study adds new information to the existing literature in this regard. Studying the perceptions of male and female teachers and learners is beneficial since it gives us insights into whether variables like teachers' and learners' gender affect their expectations of an effective teacher besides their status as a teacher or student.

Grammar translation method with strong emphasis on form-focused and translation activities is still pervasively used in Iranian English language teaching and learning context (Eslami 2010). Eslami found that Iranian English language learners find extensive use of translation activities as a shortcoming of language education system in Iran. However, it seems that gender of the learners could affect their preferences as findings of the present study indicated that male learners more than their female counterparts associated using students' first language in foreign language classroom with teachers' efficacy.

Female students have been reported to be more sensitive and tended to emphasize interpersonal and social characteristics in teachers more than male students (Smith, et al., 1994). This parallels the focus of female learners more than the males in this study on characteristics like alleviating students' anxiety in English class and arousing students' motivation. This result may stem from the female learners' natural sensitivity. This finding of the present study as well as observation that female learners more than males perceived good pronunciation as a characteristic of an EELT confirms those of Makarova and Ryan (1998).

Differences were found among the perceptions of male and female teachers regarding characteristics of an EELT in the present study as well. These differences could be a reflection of their diverse conceptualizations of educational and pedagogical issues that could immensely affect their teaching and as a consequence their learners' learning. However, further research must be undertaken to find the reasons behind such differences.

There were also some similarities between the responses of males and females in both groups of teachers and students. In both groups of teachers and learners males more than females regarded teaching English in students' mother tongue as a desirable characteristic of effective English language teachers. However, both female teachers and learners regarded teaching English in English as making a teacher effective. This finding indicates that some perceptions depend on the gender of the teachers and learners rather than their status as a teacher or learner.

The findings discussed above could have far-reaching implications in educational contexts, and particularly in an Iranian context. The teachers should try to foster a non-threatening learning environment and fulfil the students' expectations in alleviating student's anxiety to achieve the best results in their classes. The teachers also should pay attention to the learners' personal needs and design their classes in a way that suits the learners best.

This study is by no means comprehensive and there are some limitations which may be addressed in the future studies. The data were collected at one point in time in Iran, and as the nature of research in social settings entails, the views of English teachers and learners towards the characteristics of an EELT could change over time. The findings are therefore open for confirmation through replicating the research and more in-depth qualitative analyses. Moreover, how the perceptions and beliefs of English language teachers and learners affect their classroom practice remains open to question.

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Appendix A

In the Name of God

A Questionnaire on Qualities of an Effective English Language Teacher

This questionnaire is going to be used to investigate the qualities of an effective English language teacher from the perspective of Iranian English language teachers and students. Findings of this study are hoped to be beneficial to both Iranian English language teachers and learners. English language teachers will be able to check the suitability of their own and their colleagues’ beliefs regarding foreign language teaching and learning, trying to enhance their teaching practice regarding the needs and purposes of their learners as far as possible. Learners will similarly be able to understand their teachers’ beliefs and change their own wrong beliefs about foreign language teaching and learning, trying to develop more positive attitudes towards English language learning. It is worth mentioning that your participation in this research is voluntary and the data collected by means of this questionnaire will be kept confidential. Should you wish to contact the researcher during the process of research, please feel free to contact her through the following e-mail address: Homababai@yahoo.com. Thank you for your participation.

Age: Sex:

Status: Teacher of English at University , Student of English at University , High school teacher of English , High school student , Teacher of English in language institute , Student of English in language institute

(You can mark more than one box above.)

❖ Fill in the following part if you are teaching English:

University Degree:

Years of English Teaching:

First Language:

Name of institute/ university/ school where you teach:

❖ Fill in the following part if you are studying English:

Mother tongue:

Years of English education:

Your family’s approximate income:

Your father’s education level:

Your father’s job:

Your mother’s education level:

Your mother’s job:

Level (for students of English in language institute): Elementary , Intermediate , Advanced

Level (for university students): Freshman , Sophomore , Junior , Senior , MA

Level (for high school students): Freshman , Sophomore , Junior , Pre-university

Name of institute/ university/ school where you Study:

I. Please read the following list carefully. For each statement, select the response that best represents your Agreement or Disagreement. SA, A, NI, D and SD stand for Strongly Agree, Agree, No Idea, Disagree and Strongly Disagree respectively. If you have any additional comments to add about any of the following statements, please do so in the blank space provided at the end of this table.

| An effective English teacher is someone who should: | | SA | A | D | SD | NI |
|---|---|----|---|---|----|----|
| 1 | Understand spoken English well. | | | | | |
| 2 | Know English culture well. | | | | | |
| 3 | Read English well. | | | | | |
| 4 | Have a high level of proficiency with English vocabulary. | | | | | |
| 5 | Write English well. | | | | | |
| 6 | Pronounce English well. | | | | | |
| 7 | Speak English well. | | | | | |
| 8 | Be fully familiar with English grammar. | | | | | |
| 9 | Prepare the lesson well. | | | | | |
| 10 | Follow syllabus tightly. | | | | | |
| 11 | Use particular methods and techniques in teaching. | | | | | |
| 12 | Manage the class time well. | | | | | |

| | | | | | | |
|---|--|--|--|--|--|--|
| 13 | Assign homework. | | | | | |
| 14 | Integrate group activities to class. | | | | | |
| 15 | Be up-to-date (e.g. use internet and recent technologies in teaching). | | | | | |
| 16 | Teach how to learn English outside the classroom (teach language learning strategies). | | | | | |
| 17 | Use lesson plans. | | | | | |
| 18 | Teach English adapted to students' English proficiency levels. | | | | | |
| 19 | Maintain good classroom atmosphere using authority, if necessary. | | | | | |
| 20 | Teach English in English | | | | | |
| 21 | Teach English in Persian(students' native language) | | | | | |
| 22 | Assess what students have learned reasonably. | | | | | |
| 23 | Provide opportunities to use English through meaningful tasks and activities. | | | | | |
| 24 | Provide activities that arouse student's interest in learning English. | | | | | |
| 25 | Be helpful to students in and outside the classroom. | | | | | |
| 26 | Be available for students. | | | | | |
| 27 | Alleviate students' anxiety in English class. | | | | | |
| 28 | Listen to student's opinions and let them express themselves. | | | | | |
| 29 | Help students to develop self-confidence in order to learn English well. | | | | | |
| 30 | Be friendly to students. | | | | | |
| 31 | Have a good sense of humor. | | | | | |
| 32 | Not discriminate between students and treat them fairly. | | | | | |
| 33 | Arouse students' motivation for learning English. | | | | | |
| 34 | Show interest in students (by remembering students' names) and their learning. | | | | | |
| 35 | Be neat and tidy in appearance. | | | | | |
| 36 | Pay attention to the personal needs of students. | | | | | |
| 37 | Be polite and respect the personality of the students. | | | | | |
| 38 | Be disciplined. | | | | | |
| 39 | Be punctual. | | | | | |
| 40 | Be open to criticism. | | | | | |
| 41 | Be flexible. | | | | | |
| 42 | Be attentive in the class. | | | | | |
| 43 | Be interested in his/her career. | | | | | |
| 44 | Not lose temper and get angry. | | | | | |
| 45 | Stick to administrative rules and regulations. | | | | | |
| 46 | Assess his/her work regularly. | | | | | |
| Your further comments: (either in Persian or in English). | | | | | | |

Table 1. Items showing significant difference in responses of male and female teachers

| item | Mean MT* | SD MT | Mean FT* | SD FT | P value |
|---|----------|-------|----------|-------|---------|
| 5. Write English well. | 4.51 | 0.68 | 4.06 | 0.98 | 0.05 |
| 6. Pronounce English well. | 4.20 | 1.08 | 4.83 | 0.37 | 0.01 |
| 10. Follow syllabus tightly. | 4.06 | 1.03 | 3.43 | 1.16 | 0.02 |
| 21. Teach English in Persian(students' native language) | 2.72 | 1.50 | 1.73 | 1.14 | 0.01 |
| 45. Stick to administrative rules and regulations. | 3.93 | 1.13 | 3.26 | 1.17 | 0.03 |

* MT: Male Teachers, FT: Female Teachers

Table 2. Items showing significant difference between responses of male and female learners

| item | Mean ML* | SD ML | Mean FL* | SD FL | P value |
|--|----------|-------|----------|-------|---------|
| 6. Pronounce English well. | 4.44 | 0.87 | 4.68 | 0.69 | 0.02 |
| 13. Assign homework. | 3.17 | 1.31 | 3.62 | 1.13 | 0.01 |
| 16. Teach how to learn English outside the classroom (teach language learning strategies). | 3.98 | 0.91 | 4.24 | 0.92 | 0.02 |
| 20. Teach English in English | 3.51 | 1.32 | 3.94 | 1.17 | 0.02 |
| 21. Teach English in Persian(students' native language) | 3.05 | 1.48 | 2.48 | 1.23 | 0.01 |
| 23. Provide opportunities to use English through meaningful tasks and activities. | 4.08 | 0.94 | 4.43 | 0.73 | 0.01 |
| 27. Alleviate students' anxiety in English class. | 4.03 | 1.03 | 4.37 | 0.86 | 0.01 |
| 33. Arouse students' motivation for learning English. | 4.23 | 0.99 | 4.48 | 0.80 | 0.04 |

* ML: Male Learners, FL: Female Learners