

‘Good’ Language Teachers: Divergent Perspectives

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Abstract

Teachers assume several key roles in the language classroom. Because any one teacher is unlikely to possess the full range of characteristics suggested in the literature, it is vital to explore what individual class groups of learners believe are the characteristics most beneficial to their language learning. This study therefore explored their perspectives on good language teachers and compared them with those of the classroom teacher. Two language teachers and their class groups from a language college in Taiwan participated in this study. Results from a student questionnaire with data from semi-structured teacher interviews were collated to discover points of agreement and divergence. This study hopes to provoke teachers to engage in a stimulating discussion with their class groups on the agreements and divergences in conceptualizations regarding the characteristics of good language teachers.

Keywords: College language teachers, good teachers, class groups

Introduction

The current literature has listed several characteristics that good language teachers should possess. Harmer (2008) has suggested that good language teachers have sufficient knowledge of the language and be able to effectively explain its use to their students. Studies by Grundy et al. (2005) and Mullock (2003) have suggested the importance of teacher ability to understand student needs and to motivate students. Teachers undoubtedly play a key role in the language classroom as someone who transmits knowledge and inspires and motivates students to learn and achieve their language learning goals. Conducting research on the characteristics of good language teachers thus becomes a critical approach to improving the teaching skills of language teachers and enhancing teaching and learning effectiveness.

Anecdotal evidence within the college environment indicates that students believe that their teachers are an essential part of their language learning experience. However, student ideas regarding the characteristics of good language teachers vary widely. Certain students may find teachers who speak fluent L2 without an accent to be most helpful in motivating their own performance. Others may respond favorably to a teacher with a good sense of humor who entertains them. Because any one teacher is unlikely to possess the full range of characteristics to fulfill student expectations, exploring what most college students believe are the most beneficial characteristics to their language learning experience is important. Although certain

studies have attempted to address this issue by exploring student expectations from an entire cultural group (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996), these studies may overlook the specifics of a particular class group's identity. Do all students in the same cultural group have the same expectations for good language teachers? If we narrow the scope to each individual class group, could certain differences exist? Class groups of students could apply their own ideas to language learning (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003), resulting in different perspectives or expectations of the characteristics good language teachers should possess. Hence, we examine the expectations of good language teachers from each class group, rather than students in the same cultural group with uniform expectations, and compare their viewpoints for agreement or divergence.

For teacher perceptions of good language teachers, the quandary in a language classroom occurs when a substantial gap exists between teacher perceptions of good language teaching and student perceptions of a good language teacher. When the divide in perceptions is wide, teachers' best efforts to teach may be under-appreciated by students and counterproductive. In such a case, student learning effectiveness might suffer. Hence, we attempted to uncover college teacher perceptions of good language teacher characteristics to most benefit student language learning.

This study has four purposes:

- To explore the perceptions of various college class groups on the characteristics of good language teachers that are most beneficial to student language learning.
- To explore college teacher perceptions of the characteristics of good language teachers that are most beneficial to student language learning.
- To deconstruct the data revealing gaps between class groups and between student/teacher perceptions.
- To formulate methods of narrowing the perception gap between students and teachers regarding the characteristics of good language teachers.

To achieve these purposes, the following research questions are proposed:

1. From the perspective of various college class groups, what are the vital characteristics of good language teachers?
2. From the perspective of college teachers, what are the vital characteristics of good language teachers?
3. Are there any gaps between teacher and student perceptions of the characteristics of good language teachers?
4. If gaps are exposed, what strategies can be developed to narrow the gaps for a more positive language learning experience in the classroom?

Literature Review

The literature review is divided into two themes—the first explores relevant literature on the characteristics of good language teachers. The second gives an overview of group dynamics theory that elaborates on how each class group has its own unique identity and individuality, which lays the groundwork of why we explore language learner expectations of good language teachers based on class groups.

Good Language Teachers

Defining good language teachers is a complex matter. Relevant discussions in the literature have converged around two types of sources: the views of authors offered in theoretical discussions, and the data of researchers obtained from empirical studies conducted with language teachers or language learners in various language learning contexts. Authors have offered a comprehensive theoretical overview of the characteristics of good language teachers according to language teaching theories. Harmer (2008, p. 23) mentioned that a good language teacher should have sufficient knowledge of the language and appealing information. They should also be passionate and enthusiastic in their teaching and be able to effectively explain the use of the language (e.g., grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary) to students. Brown (1994, p. 428) believed 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 discussed the importance of understanding and adapting to different cultures and the desire to upgrade teaching skills. Both Kral (1988) and Shulman (1987) emphasized the importance of teachers reflecting on their own teaching. Shulman considered it essential for teachers to look “back at the teaching and learning that has occurred” for it is through the processes of rethinking, analyzing, and reconstructing teaching steps that a “professional learns from experience” (p. 19). Similar ideas are also expressed by Boon (2011, p. 29), who discussed how teachers learn and grow from experiences through reflecting “carefully on what it is we do each day,” and by Tsui (2003), who mentioned the importance of reflecting and exercising judgment to face appropriate teaching challenges. Tsui (2003) also emphasized the importance of teachers’ skills, including how expert teachers conduct lesson planning, respond to classroom events, improvise during teaching, and solve problems that occur during teaching.

Data derived from empirical research on language teachers and language learners revealed humanistic aspects of the teacher’s role toward students. Mainland Chinese students identified patience and humor among their top three expectations 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 include knowing and understanding the strengths, weaknesses, and needs of students, and treating students with courtesy and respect, while maintaining cutting-edge knowledge and skills (Mullock, 2003, p. 10). Undergraduate students and English teachers at a university in Yemen both agreed that the ability of a teacher to plan and deliver an effective lesson and possess fluency and good communication skills in the foreign language are essential characteristics of a good EFL teacher (Kadha, 2009).

Borg (2006) requested 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 a more diverse teaching methodology were believed to be characteristics unique to good language teachers.

These characteristics were selected from an abundance of traits offered in the literature. Although limiting the number of characteristics under discussion seems necessary, the characteristics presented form a representative sample of the disparity of opinions on the

topic. Because of the complexity of the issue, even this restricted selection lacks consistent, clear criteria of the most vital characteristics of good language teachers. The statement by Prodromou (1991, p. 3) that “very different people make good teachers for very different reasons” validates an attempt to classify various characteristics of good language teachers. Synthesizing these characteristics, the following taxonomy for analytical purposes is offered:

- A. Good command of the L2 (e.g., good command of L2 vocabulary)
- B. Sound teaching skills (e.g., diverse teaching methodology)
- C. Empathy toward students (e.g., understanding students’ needs)
- D. Personal qualities (e.g., being patient)
- E. Reflection and improvement (e.g., regularly reflecting on teaching)

Although certain studies have focused on exploring these characteristics from the language learner viewpoint and others from the language teacher viewpoint, exploring this issue from both sides may be valuable. Studies focused on exploring the gaps between teacher and learner viewpoints (Yee, 2003) are rare, and no research has compared the gaps between teacher perspectives and further divided learners into different class groups. This study is a pioneering one that explores various class group expectations of good language teachers in addition to comparing language learner and teacher expectations. The following section presents an explanation of the necessity of exploring language learner expectations based on class groups.

Group Dynamics

The dominating perspective on language learning has largely been characterized by the individual, such as the learning strategy of the individual learner, their needs, and how they attribute their success or failure in language learning. Because learning is a personal experience, the individual approach seems logical. However, is the individual perspective on language learning a sufficient explanation of its complex process? Language learning can be “socially negotiated,” “socially distributed,” and “context specific” (Rueda & Moll, 1994, p. 131), and is not a unitary event that exists only in the mind of the learner, but also what occurs around a particular learner during learning. This notion that a wider sociocultural context influences learning is based on Vygotskian sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the importance of the social dimensions of learning and how working and interacting with others effectively enhances cognitive development (Lantolf, 2000).

Certain second language learning researchers within the past decade have expanded their language learning research to consider factors within the learning environment, such as the characteristics and influences of a class group. The most appropriate theory that portrays the uniqueness of each class group is group dynamics theory, which examines group behavior, including group developments through different stages of formation, structure, cohesion, norms, and leadership (Forsyth, 1990). Recognizing the importance of group dynamics, Dörnyei (1994) listed four group-specific motivational components directly applied from group dynamics theory (group goal-orientedness, group norms, group cohesiveness, and group structure) under the learning situation level, one of the three levels (language level, learner level, and learning situation level) in his tripartite motivational framework that affects learner motivation. To expand the importance of group dynamics from L2 motivation to language

learning in general, Dörnyei published several articles and books with other researchers such as Ehrman (1998) and Malderez (1997, 1999), discussing the importance of group dynamics theory in language classrooms. Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) also published a book, adding practical implications of group dynamics in classrooms to the literature.

In the aforementioned literature, a basic principle of group dynamics theory is that each group (in this research context, referring to each class group) has its own individual characteristics (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003). The level of cohesiveness for each group could differ. One group could be highly cohesive, have many interactions among themselves, and work cooperatively (Dörnyei & Murphey, 2003; Oyster, 2000). However, another group could have low cohesiveness, scarcely communicate outside of class, and prefer to work individually (*ibid.*). One class group could possess positive norms such as punctuality in class attendance or submitting assignments, whereas another class group could possess more negative norms, where group members are often late to class and do not complete assignments (Dörnyei & Malderez, 1999; Ehrman & Dörnyei, 1998). To language teachers, each class group is unique. Ushioda (2003) illustrated this in her paper. When teachers discuss student learning situations and motivations, they often use the collective term, “this class is motivated” or “that class is unmotivated.” Learners understand that they are engaged in classroom activities with others. When interviewed, they tend to say “*our* teacher said...” or “we performed listening in class today.” Language teachers recognize the differences among various class groups based on their in-class behavior or from their interactions with students outside of class. Hence, we suggest treating one class group as an individual unit and exploring its unique characteristics. We focus on the expectations of each class group regarding good language teachers. Could the various experiences of teachers in different class groups derive from each class group having its own expectations of language teachers? Certain class groups might respond to teachers possessing interactive teaching styles, whereas others might prefer teachers who use the newest teaching skills (e.g., incorporate E-technology into their teaching). We explore the unique expectations of each class group regarding good language teachers for a fuller understanding of any matched or mismatched expectations.

Research Methodology

Research Design

We used a mixed method research design – collecting both quantitative questionnaire data and qualitative interview data. The research data were collected at a private language college in Southern Taiwan. A questionnaire with 21 Likert scale items was distributed to four class groups, approximately 250 college students, to garner student perceptions of the characteristics of good language teachers that are most beneficial to their language learning experience. These four class-group participants (two freshman class groups (Classes 1A and 1B) and two sophomore class groups (Classes 2A and 2B), comprised students majoring in foreign language instruction during the research period. This sample pool is a convenience sample to access student groups that suit the selection criteria of this research.

The 21 Likert scale items were categorized based on the taxonomy discussed in the literature review. The order of items in various categories of the questionnaire was randomized. The

questionnaire was first piloted to ten senior students of the same department and any unclear instruction or wording was revised in the final version.

Subsequently, semi-structured interviews were conducted with two college teachers. One teacher was teaching Class 1A and 1B at the time of this research, whereas the other was teaching Class 2A and 2B. These teachers participated in a semi-structured interview lasting approximately 20-30 minutes. The interview started with a list of probe questions, followed by follow-up questions to interviewee responses (Bryman, 2001). The interview probe questions (e.g., “Have you ever had a good language teacher? What made him/her so special?”) were intended to reveal a fuller picture of these teachers’ perceptions of the characteristics of good language teachers that are beneficial to students’ language learning experience.

Data Analysis

The questionnaires were coded and keyed into *SPSS* for statistical analysis. The Cronbach’s alpha internal consistency was checked for the Likert scale items and reached the satisfactory level (alpha = .7935). Certain simple descriptive statistical procedures (such as means, minimum, maximum, and standard deviation) were first conducted, followed by t tests to explore target group differences. The semi-structured interviews were transcribed and the transcription data were coded and analyzed. These two data sets were collated to explore the points of agreement or divergence.

Research Findings and Discussion

Quantitative Analysis: Student Questionnaire Data

The questionnaire was administered to all four class groups at a private language college in Southern Taiwan in 2009 [1]. The four class groups totaled 219 participants – 110 freshman students and 109 sophomore students. The questionnaire responses were processed in *SPSS*. This section presents the questionnaire results from the freshman class groups, followed by the sophomore class groups.

Freshman Classes 1A and 1B

Table 1 below presents the questionnaire results of freshman class groups and illustrates the opinions of freshman students on the most and least critical characteristics of good language teachers.

Table 1. Freshmen class groups questionnaire results

Rankings	Class Groups	
Most important	1A	No. 10 – A good language teacher should be fair to every student. [category – empathy toward students] No. 1 – A good language teacher should have a thorough knowledge of the language (e.g. grammar, vocabulary...etc.) [category – good command of the L2]
	1B	No. 9 – A good language teacher should treat students with courtesy and respect. [category – empathy toward students]

Rankings	Class Groups	
		No. 10 – A good language teacher should be fair to every student. [category – empathy toward students]
Least Important	1A & 1B	No. 19 – A good language teacher should use the L2 to conduct the class. [category – Sound teaching skills]

To compare the results between Class 1A and Class 1B, we administered an independent *t* test. The results show differences between these two class groups:

t test at the 0.01 Level:

Statement No. 1: A good language teacher should have a thorough knowledge of the language.

Statement No. 2: A good language teacher should have the ability to interact with people.

Statement No. 4: A good language teacher should have accurate pronunciation and intonation when speaking the language.

Statement No. 10: A good language teacher should be fair to every student.

The quantitative questionnaire results of freshman class groups indicated the following points of agreement or divergence:

1. Both class groups view empathy toward students as a vital characteristic of good language teachers.
2. Both class groups assume that whether a good language teacher uses the L2 to conduct the class is insignificant.
3. The *t* test results show that both class groups hold different viewpoints on the importance of teachers' good command of the L2. Class 1A believes that regardless of whether the teacher has a thorough knowledge of L2, accurate pronunciation or intonation is more critical, compared to the opinions of Class 1B.

Sophomore Classes 2A and 2B

Table 2 below presents the questionnaire results of sophomore class groups and presents the opinions of sophomore students on the most and least critical characteristics of good language teachers.

Table 2. Sophomore class groups questionnaire results

Rankings	Class Groups	
Most important	2A	No. 10 – A good language teacher should be fair to every student. [category – empathy toward students] No. 9 – A good language teacher should treat students with courtesy and respect. [category – empathy toward students]
	2B	No. 9 – A good language teacher should treat students with courtesy and respect. [category – empathy toward students] No. 10 – A good language teacher should be fair to every student. [category – empathy toward students]
Least Important	2A & 2B	No. 19 – A good language teacher should use the L2 to conduct the class. [category – Sound teaching skills]

To explore the differences between Classes 2A and 2B, an independent t test was administered to compare their differences. Only two statements were found to have statistical differences:

t test at the 0.05 Level:

Statement No. 20: A good language teacher should reflect on his or her teaching regularly and seek for ways to improve.

t test at the 0.01 Level:

Statement No. 19: A good language teacher should use the L2 to conduct the class.

The quantitative questionnaire results of sophomore class groups indicated the following points of agreement or divergence:

1. Both class groups considered empathy toward students as a critical characteristic of good language teachers.
2. Similar to the results of the freshman groups, both sophomore groups considered that whether a good language teacher uses the L2 to conduct the class is insignificant.
3. Class 2A students also expected good language teachers to reflect on their teaching and update their teaching skills more than students in Class 2B did.

Qualitative Analysis: Teacher Interview Data

After analyzing student ideas on the characteristics of good language teachers, we compared their opinions with those of their teachers. An interview with the language teacher of Classes 1A and 1B during the data collection period indicated the following results. Category E—reflection and improvement—is the most crucial category, followed by Category B—teachers’ sound teaching skills, and lastly, Category A—teachers’ good command of the L2.

This teacher further explained why it is vital for good language teachers to continually reflect on their teaching and update their teaching knowledge:

Teachers must adapt their teaching styles to the changing environment. They should teach various students differently. Because students are individuals, teacher expectations should also differ.

Freshman students in Classes 1A and 1B did not consider Category E, teacher reflection and improvement, as crucial. These two student groups most valued teacher empathy toward students. This gap could create problems in the classroom because the teacher may focus more on changing teaching styles and techniques, yet feel frustrated because of a lack of positive feedback from students. However, students expect teachers to facilitate their mutual relationship (e.g., show fairness and respect), yet they may also feel frustrated because teachers focus more on various teaching techniques.

The *t* test result from the questionnaire shows that Class 1A students considered the teacher having a good command of the L2, such as accurate pronunciation or intonation, as more vital than students in Class 1B do. However, the Class 1A and 1B teacher considered this category as the least vital. This disparity in expectations might explain why the teacher is more satisfied with Class 1B's final presentation performance than with that of Class 1A:

Class B is harder-working than Class A [during the second semester], which has shown little improvement. Taking the final presentation as an example, the students from Class B all reached my expectation, presenting for a full 20 minutes, whereas most groups in Class A only presented for 10 minutes or so.

The differing performances between students in Classes 1A and 1B could be attributed to various factors. However, it is also possible that based on the data collected for this study, the Class 1A and 1B teacher did not value teachers' good command of the L2 (e.g., pronunciation, grammar) as much as other categories. Students in Class 1A might have had difficulty adjusting to this teacher, and hence performed poorly in their final presentations.

For the sophomore classes, interview data with the teacher of Classes 2A and 2B (both sophomore classes) indicated that Category A – good command of the L2 – is the most crucial category, followed by Category B (sound teaching skills) and Category C (empathy toward students). This is noteworthy because for Classes 2A and 2B, good command of the L2 was not considered as critical as other categories. This could create a problem in the classroom because these students likely expect teacher awareness of their needs, and that every student is treated fairly and with respect, whereas the teacher likely attempts to improve student ability through professional knowledge in the classroom, which may result in frustration for certain students. This could be why the Class 2A and 2B teacher had difficulties with the sophomore students (Class 2A):

Teaching Class A is tiring because you do not know their problems. They do not tell you either in class or after class. Class B interacts more, so you know which point in your lesson is unclear or needs clarification.

Perhaps the Class 2A and 2B teacher experienced problems with students in Class 2A because the students did not feel a close and comfortable relationship with the teacher, and hence they did not interact with the teacher as much.

Overall Findings and Discussion

The previous two subsections have presented our research data with preliminary analysis. This subsection presents a summary and discussion of the major findings of this study.

Research Question 1: From the perspective of various college class groups, what are the critical characteristics of good language teachers?

All four class groups involved in this study valued teachers showing empathy toward students most highly. Students cared most that teachers

- treat students with respect and courtesy
- show fairness to every student

Mullock (2003, p. 10) described one of the top five characteristics of a good TESOL teacher as “treat students with courtesy and respect, show empathy toward students,” which is similar to the responses of the student participants in this research. Stronge (2007) also indicated that the role of fairness and respect is a vital prerequisite of effective teaching in the minds of students. Similarly to the student participants in this study, Stronge (2007) emphasized that students associate fairness and respect with a teacher being consistent, avoiding ridicule, and treating them as people. This could be because language learning involves students actively participating in the classroom (i.e., practice in speaking L2), being unafraid of making mistakes, and being willing to try something new. For all these to occur, students must feel that they are respected and treated fairly in the classroom to gain enough confidence to actively participate. Their relationship with the teacher (i.e., the comfort of knowing that the teacher is fair and respectful) is a vital for attaining such confidence.

Other than the similarities across all four class groups, we discovered differences between freshman and sophomore class groups. The freshman Class 1A valued the importance of a thorough knowledge of L2 and teacher enthusiasm more than students in Class 1B do. For sophomore class groups, Class 2A valued the importance of teachers’ reflective ability more than students in Class 2B do. The different expectations from different class groups verify the notion proposed by Dörnyei and Murphey (2003) that each class group is unique and has its own characteristics. We show that each class group had its own unique characteristics, resulting in various expectations regarding good language teachers. The implication of this finding on classroom language teachers is discussed later in this section.

Research Question 2: From the perspective of college teachers, what are crucial characteristics of good language teachers?

The two teachers that participated in this research study, a freshman teacher, and a sophomore teacher, held differing opinions on the characteristics of good language teachers. The freshman teacher believed that language teachers’ ability to reflect and improve is the most crucial aspect, whereas a teachers’ good command of the L2 (e.g., accurate pronunciation) is the least crucial category. This is in direct conflict with the sophomore teacher’s viewpoint that teachers’ good command of the L2 is the most vital category of good language teachers. These differences in opinion indicate the individual beliefs and styles of every teacher, and the differences in what each teacher finds essential for learners. Hence, it is necessary for teachers to explain their own beliefs and styles and discuss relevant issues stemming from these beliefs

(e.g., classroom grading criteria, teaching processes, or expectations for the students) with the language learners. Language teachers can teach more effectively when students have a greater understanding of teacher beliefs, thus ensuring language learner success in the classroom.

Research Question 3: Are there any gaps between teacher and student perceptions of the characteristics good language teachers?

and

Research Question 4: If gaps are exposed, what strategies can be developed to narrow them for a more positive language learning experience in the classroom?

As discussed in Section 4.2, a gap exists between teacher and student perceptions of the characteristics of good language teachers. The four class groups of students believed that empathy toward students is crucial and expect teachers to show fairness and respect to every student in the classroom. However, both teachers valued empathy toward students less than other categories. The freshman teacher found teachers' ability to reflect and update teaching knowledge as the most important one, whereas the sophomore teacher values teachers' good command of the L2 as the most important. According to this finding, teachers should openly discuss their teaching beliefs at the beginning of a semester, communicate what they find important, and logically explain their reasons. This communication should be reciprocal—teachers should discover what learners value most and what their expectations are. By administering a survey, teachers can obtain greater knowledge regarding to what extent their beliefs differ from their students and the potential problems that could occur based on these differences, and initiate a classroom discussion regarding these differences. This might lead to greater clarity for both parties and to solve potential problems through teachers exercising judgment on their current level of competence and the type of challenges they assume, which, according to Tsui (2003, p. 276), is a differentiating characteristic between expert teachers and novice teachers.

Conclusion

This study explored the viewpoints of various college class groups and their teachers on the characteristics of good language teachers. Based on the literature, a taxonomy of good language teacher characteristics was devised. Four class groups (two freshman groups and two sophomore groups) and their teachers at a language college in Southern Taiwan participated in this study. A Chinese version of the questionnaire was distributed to all four class groups, totaling 219 research participants. Two teachers also filled out the questionnaire and participated in a 30-min semi-structured interview.

The data suggest that all four class groups value the importance of empathy toward students the most. They all find it vital for teachers to show fairness and respect to students. However, teachers did not place the same value on empathy toward students. The freshman class teacher valued Category E (teachers' ability to reflect and update teaching skills) as the most critical, whereas the sophomore class teacher valued Category A (teachers' good command of the L2) as the most crucial. This gap between perceptions and beliefs could cause classroom conflict because teachers may use various updated teaching skills to attract student attention, whereas

students may feel dissatisfied because they have not observed teachers showing fairness in the classroom.

We suggest several means by which teachers could mitigate potential conflicts or problems in language classrooms. First, teachers could share their teaching beliefs regarding good language teachers with their students and discover each language class' expectations at the beginning of a semester. Through open communication, teachers and students can gain greater understanding of each other's expectations and thus minimize the conflicts caused by misunderstandings. We conclude that language learners at this research site value fair treatment and respect by their teachers. The findings are similar to those of Chen (2005), and Liu and Meng (2009) regarding Chinese students.

We have identified the noteworthy problem of the possible gaps between student and teacher perceptions of good language teachers, and shown that various class groups could have different perceptions, and thus different expectations. Recognition of these gaps can facilitate language teachers in gaining greater understanding of their students and engaging in steps (e.g., an open discussion at the beginning of the semester) to minimize possible problems.

Note

Due to personal family responsibilities, while the data was collected in 2009, it has not been properly examined and analyzed until a few years ago.

About the Author

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