

A Cross-cultural Understanding of the Characteristics of a Good Teacher

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ABSTRACT The definition of a good teacher varies from person to person depending on the expectations of the people defining it. Everybody defines it by paying attention to different characteristics like sense of humour, classroom management abilities, good field knowledge, etc. In this paper, Erasmus students coming from both Eastern European (Czech Republic, Poland, Latvia, Austria) and Western European countries (Spain, England, France, and Germany) were asked to define the characteristics of a good teacher with the help of a questionnaire. In this paper, the participants' opinions were analyzed in terms of teachers' "background knowledge", "professional skills", and "personal qualities". The findings indicate that there are differences between students' views related to the characteristics of a good teacher depending on which part of Europe they are from.

INTRODUCTION

When people are asked to evaluate teaching or teachers, there are many different ways that they can do this. They can either send observers to classrooms in which they want to evaluate teaching or they can gather information from one of the current or former students who are or were exposed to that teaching or they can ask the opinions of the colleagues of that specific teacher. Surely, all of these possible techniques have got both pros and cons but teachers, who are among the most important components of the teaching process, are still the focus of attention and they are the ones that are evaluated for a number of reasons in many different contexts.

Teachers are important elements that contribute to the quality of teaching and learning; therefore, their characteristics and how they behave in the classroom have an important role and a "life-transforming effect" (Hanushek 2011) on their learners. With the requirements of the changing technology, the expectations of the students and the schools from teachers have also been changing continuously. Teachers are asked to

refresh their knowledge repeatedly, to attend teacher development seminars so as to keep up with the latest trends in the field of teaching and also to learn how to benefit from the technological tools in order to enrich their experiences.

General characteristics of ideal and/or effective teachers were discussed either based on anecdotal experience or research by some scholars (Girard 1977; Hammadou and Bernhardt 1987; Finocchiaro 1988; Prodromou 1991; Brosh 1996; Vellido 1999; Walls et al. 2002; Hargrove 2005; Borg 2006; Walker 2008; Miller 2012). However, the difficulty of answering the question of "who is a good teacher?" is emphasized by different researchers (Ebel 1967; Ornstein 1976) because of the limitations of the related research. Chingos and Peterson (2011) point out that teacher quality is not related to either holding a college major or acquiring a master's degree. It includes many different qualities. According to Reid et al. (2014), a "good teacher" is a global teacher because he/she might need to teach in another country or teach learners from different nationalities. At present, all over the world, many attempts are being made to describe these qualities by means of lists of competencies, which seems to be strongly supported by policy-makers (Becker et al. 2003).

In one of the first works on teacher characteristics, Spady (1973) states that effectiveness of a teacher is based on such characteristics as the subject matter, pedagogy, enthusiasm and empathy. Miller (2012), in her revised version of her article, precisely comments on the ten characteristics of a good teacher, which are:

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1. having a contagious enthusiasm for teaching
2. being creative
3. adding pace and humour to the class
4. challenging students
5. being encouraging and patient, who will not give up on students
6. taking an interest in students as people
7. knowing grammar well and explaining something on the spot
8. taking a minute or two to answer a question after class
9. treating all the members of the class equally
10. leaving his/her emotional baggage outside the classroom

In some studies, personality of teachers is considered to be the most important aspect of teachers by the participants because the teacher's behaviour is seen as a function of his personality (Ryans 1960). For instance, Cruickshank et al. (2003: 329) state that effective teachers are "caring, supportive, concerned about the welfare of students, knowledgeable about their subject matter, able to get along with parents...and genuinely excited about the work that they do". Cruickshank et al. also believe that effective teachers are enthusiastic, warm and they have a sense of humour. Likewise, Walker (2008) states that an effective teacher is prepared, positive, creative, fair, compassionate, forgiving and s/he is the one that holds high expectations, displays a personal touch, cultivates a sense of belonging, has a sense of humour, respects students, and admits mistakes. According to Blishen (1969), among the desired qualities of a teacher, are patience, modesty, politeness, being tolerant and paying attention to the pupils. In another context, Saritas (2013) asked the definition of a good teacher to the secondary school students in three different schools and the participants mainly focused on such individual characteristics as "being fair and communication abilities".

In some other studies, the academic component was emphasized as the most significant teacher characteristics. In their study, Musgrove and Taylor (1972) included five categories for students' evaluation; namely, personality, ability to maintain discipline, teaching methods, teacher behaviour in the classroom and order and organization. They found out that the most important teacher quality was that the teacher taught them well and guided them sufficiently.

Hargrove (2005) claims that in order for a "good" teacher to be "great", s/he needs to do the following things: establishing a natural critical learning environment, asking provocative questions and providing guidance as students struggle with answers, grabbing students' attention and keeping it focused, planning instruction based on clear goals, being willing to help students outside of class, and providing diverse learning experiences.

The importance of student expectations of teachers' classroom practices has also been recognized by researchers in education (Darkenwald and Gavin 1987; Croninger 1991; Good 1993) and psychology (Eysenck and Keane 1995). These expectations are surely dependent on such important factors as "culture", "gender", "age", "mode of study" and "university type" (Sander et al. 2000). They thought that the more their expectations were met, the more successful students would become.

In their research, Harden and Crosby (2000) focused on six major teacher roles specified by the students, which are: facilitator, role model, assessor, planner, resource developer, and information provider. According to these defined roles, they are supposed to facilitate the process of learning, assess both the students and the curriculum, plan the curriculum and the course, create the learning materials, provide information about their specific field, and be a good role model. Even though these six roles and their sub-categories have been defined separately, they are considered to be interrelated.

Oruç (2008) states that according to the findings of the related research, the factors affecting students' definition of a good teacher can be classified under some headings such as: culture, gender, age, the type of the university, and the field of study.

When the findings summarized above are taken into account, it is apparent that most of the research on this topic is related to academic and personality-based factors. Even though there is a great amount of research on good teacher characteristics in terms of personality factors and academic background, the opinions of students from different cultural backgrounds related to "good teacher characteristics" have not been studied sufficiently. For this reason, in this paper, the cultural factor has been dwelled upon and the differences regarding the perceptions of participants from different cultural backgrounds (Eastern European Background and

Western European Background) have been taken into consideration. With this idea in mind, this paper aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the characteristics of effective teachers in the eyes of university students from Western European countries?
2. What are the characteristics of effective teachers in the eyes of university students from Eastern European countries?

METHODOLOGY

The Setting and the Participants

The research for this paper was carried out at a Turkish state university at the beginning of the Spring Term of 2012-2013 academic year. The participants of the research were international students who came to Turkey through ERASMUS Program from different countries and who attended the intensive Turkish courses offered by the university. The participants were from Germany, Poland, Austria, Czech Republic, Spain, England, Latvia and France. The participants were divided into two groups; namely, Western European Countries (Spain, England, France, and Germany) and Eastern European Countries (Czech Republic, Poland, Latvia, Austria). The number of participants coming from Western European Countries was fourteen while the number of students coming from Eastern European Countries was thirteen. The total number of the participants was twenty-seven.

Instrument

The measurement instrument used in this research is the “*Questionnaire of Good Teacher Characteristics*” developed by Oruç (2008). It is a 5-Item Likert-Type Scale with twenty-six statements. The questionnaire also includes a part including ‘Background Knowledge’, ‘Professional Skills’, and ‘Personal Qualities’, in which the participants were asked to order the given qualities. The reliability of the instrument was tested and the Cronbach Alpha Level was found to be .83, which is considered to be reliable.

Data Collection and Analysis

As the first step of the data collection process, the participants signed a consent form re-

lated to their agreement to take part in the research. Secondly, they filled out the questionnaires, which took twenty minutes. Afterwards, the data of the paper were analyzed with the help of the SPSS 20.0 program in order to find out the frequencies of the participants’ responses.

RESULTS

This paper attempted to identify the differences between the definitions of a good teacher in the eyes of university students from Eastern European and Western European countries. Twenty-seven students took part in the research, fourteen of whom were from Western European countries and thirteen of whom were from Eastern European countries. It is believed that findings related to the characteristics of a good teacher are quite valuable considering the important connection between teacher characteristics and student achievement (Wayne and Youngs 2003).

It is possible to see the numbers and percentages of participants in each group (Table 1). Participants from Western European countries constitute the 51 per cent (N: 14), whereas the participants from Eastern European Countries constitute the 49 per cent (N: 13) of the sample of the study.

Table 1: Distribution of participants according to their nationalities

Participants	Number	Percentage (%)
Western European Group	14	51
Eastern European Group	13	49
Total	27	100

As a part of the questionnaire, the participants were asked to rank some qualities of good teachers according to the order of importance. The qualities were grouped under three titles; namely, *Background Knowledge*, *Professional Skills* and *Personal Qualities*, which is shown in Table 2.

The three basic titles related to the qualities of good teachers were analyzed in terms of the subcategories so as to specify what each title consists of (Table 2). For instance, the subcategories of “*background knowledge*” included teachers’ academic background, content knowledge, cultural sensitivity, and their experience

Table 2: Qualities of a good teacher pre-defined by the questionnaire

<i>Background knowledge</i>	<i>Professional skills</i>	<i>Personal qualities</i>
Fluency within different academic areas	Class management skills	Respect for individuals
Content knowledge	Knowledge of assessment	Awareness of others' feelings
Experience and ability to relate it	Ability to respond/communicate appropriately	Enthusiasm, energy, passion
Cultural sensitivity	Clear expectations	Interest in student motivation
Up-to-date information about practice area	Clear syllabus	Flexibility
Academic background including a number of relevant classes	Command of age and level appropriate methods and materials	Patience
Personal experience with L2	Knowledge about where to find resources	Even-temperedness
		Sense of humour
		Work ethic/hardworking
		Confidence
		Organization/time management
		Interesting personally
		commitment

and their ability to benefit from this experience. The subcategories of “*professional skills*” consisted of class management skills, having a clear syllabus, choosing appropriate methods and materials for different learner groups, and finally, the subtitles of “*personal qualities*” included patience, respecting individuals, enthusiasm, energy and passion. The opinions of the participants related to each of these teacher characteristics are given in the following tables.

The most important item in the first column for the participants from Western European countries is “*academic background including a number of relevant classes*”(Table 3). The participants (57.1 per cent) from Western European countries indicated that this is the most important characteristic a teacher should have in terms of background knowledge. However, 69.2 per cent of the participants from Eastern European countries chose “*fluency within different academic*

Table 3: Participants’ views about teacher’s background knowledge

<i>Teacher qualities</i>	<i>Western European students %</i>	<i>Eastern European students %</i>
<i>Background Knowledge</i>		
Academic background including a number of relevant classes	57.1	
Fluency within different academic areas		69.2

areas” as the most important characteristic of a good teacher related to background knowledge.

The participants were asked to choose the most important professional skill a good teacher should have (Table 4). The majority of the participants coming from Western European countries stated that the most important professional skill is “*class management skills*” (64.2 %), whereas the majority of the participants coming from Eastern European countries said that the most important professional skill is “*having a clear syllabus*” (76.9 %).

The participants were asked to rank the most important personal qualities a good teacher should have (Table 5). The participants (85.7 per cent) coming from Western European countries indicated that the most important personal quality for a good teacher is “*organization and time management*” while the majority of participants (84.6 %) coming from Eastern European countries said that it is “*sense of humour*”.

Table 4: Participants’ views about teacher’s professional skills

<i>Teacher qualities</i>	<i>Western European students%</i>	<i>Eastern European students%</i>
<i>Professional Skills</i>		
Class management skills	64.2	
Having a clear syllabus		76.9

Table 5: Participants' views about teacher's personal qualities

	<i>Teacher qualities</i>	<i>Western European students%</i>	<i>Eastern European students%</i>
<i>Personal Qualities</i>	Organization and time managment	85.7	
	Sense of humour		84.6

DISCUSSION

Unlike most of the research seeking to identify the characteristics of a “good” or “efficient” teacher and coming up with findings related to personal or academic features (Hargrove 2005; Walker 2008; Miller 2012; Saritas 2013), this paper focused more on the differences stemming from cultural differences. However, the findings of the research are in line with those of Reid et al. (2014), who emphasize the significance of views coming from different cultural backgrounds. As can clearly be seen from the results above, there are differences between the opinions of students related to their definition of a “good teacher” in terms of teachers’ background knowledge and professional skills and qualities even though all the students are from European countries. Based on the differences in the participants’ views, it is possible to say that geographical location of the participants’ home countries also has an influence on their beliefs and expectations from their teachers. Based on the results presented above, one can easily talk about the significance of “culture” in people’s choices, their expectations and opinions. Therefore, it is inevitable for students coming from different cultural backgrounds to have different opinions on the characteristics of a “good teacher” and teachers, too, will be directly affected from different aspects of culture. Sowden (2007) points out that a teacher will be involved in and affected by different aspects of culture such as the culture of the nation, culture of the specific academic discipline, international education, the host institution, the classroom and the students.

Students’ views about the characteristics of a good teacher are very important since they are ‘objective consumers of instructional processes, their judgments should be the sole determinants in defining the significant variables of the “good teacher”’ (Grush and Costin 1975). Even

though there are many different studies carried out so as to find out “good teacher characteristics”, they have shown the difficulty in arriving at any general agreement on standards for defining these characteristics. It is also stated by some researchers that objective measurement of the good teacher is impossible (Combs and Mitzel 1964); however, carrying our similar studies in different levels of education might contribute to the field of education and it might be easier to define who is a good teacher. While doing that, it will be more enlightening to focus on different aspects effecting the participants’ opinions such as gender, culture, age, socio-economic level, and the level of education.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, teachers are one of the most important components of the learning/teaching process. Expected attitudes from teachers are major issues that have been widely investigated up to now. Although previous research focused on the academic and personal teacher characteristics contributing to students’ success, this research mainly emphasized the cross-cultural differences between the opinions of students from Eastern and Western European countries and the researcher found out that among the teacher qualities pre-defined in the questionnaire, students from Western European countries chose “academic background”, “organization and time management”, and “class management skills” as the most important characteristics. On the other hand, students from Eastern European countries thought that “fluency within different academic areas”, “having a clear syllabus”, and “sense of humour” are the most important teacher characteristics.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDIES

Ideas coming from the direct actors of the process of learning, that is to say, from learners, have always supplied invaluable data to the researchers, practitioners and teachers. The attitudes learners prefer in the classroom might have an influence on their own success. Paying attention to learners’ preferences and making necessary changes according to these preferences will contribute to students’ success and the positive image of the teacher in the classroom.

Similar studies using participants from different countries or participants that are practicing teachers/administrators might enrich the literature related to the concept of “good” or “ideal” teacher. Secondly, studies with different data collection procedures such as conducting in-depth interviews about the views of students as well as using questionnaires might shed light on the issue and triangulating the data might make the findings more reliable. Another possibility is to include students from different academic fields in the sample of the studies like this one so that differences stemming from students’ academic background might be understood much better.

Moreover, having another look into the teacher education programs after such research is carried out might be a good idea as these programs have an important role in the development of teachers. If the expectations of learners from teachers are understood better, it is believed that this will directly influence the quality of education.

LIMITATIONS

The research in this paper has surely some limitations, which should be taken into consideration while reading the findings of the research. It is believed that all the participants taking part in this research have given their sincere opinions rather than the socially acceptable answers. What is more, the researcher believes that the reliability of the findings of this research might be augmented with the help of the inclusion of more students in the study samples who represent more different countries.

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