

STUDENT TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS OF TEACHER COMPETENCE AND THEIR ATTRIBUTIONS FOR SUCCESS AND FAILURE IN LEARNING

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Abstract

Whitty (1996 :89–90) identifies two sets of qualities that characterise a successful professional teacher: professional characteristics and professional competences. Professional characteristics include professional values, personal and professional development, communication and relationships as well as synthesis and application. Professional competences include knowledge and understanding of children and their learning, subject knowledge, curriculum, the education system and the teacher's role. On the other hand, Medley and Shannon (1994) hold that there are three dimensions of teacher quality instead of two: teacher effectiveness (the degree to which a teacher achieves desired effects upon students), teacher competence (the extent to which a teacher has the knowledge and skills) and teacher performance (how a teacher behaves in the process of teaching). In situations where the teachers are interpersonally oriented, attentive, empathic and fully cognizant of the students' ability and they believe in the students, the students are extremely positive towards teaching (Skolverket, 1995; Chedzoy and Burden, 2007). Even if differences between schools and classes can be explained to a certain extent by factors in the students' backgrounds, it is believed that teachers and school leaders are those who have the greatest influence on the school's inner environment and culture. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to probe how student teachers in the English language teaching department see teachers' competence and skills, to which factors they attribute their success and failure in language learning, and what they think the solutions are.

Key Words: Student teachers, teacher development, failure, success.

There are two sets of qualities that characterise a successful professional teacher: professional characteristics and professional competences (Whitty, 1996, p.89–90). Professional characteristics include professional values, personal and professional development, communication and relationships as well as synthesis and application. Professional competences include knowledge and understanding of children and their learning, subject knowledge, curriculum, the education system, and the teacher's role. On the other hand, Medley and Shannon (1994) hold that there are three dimensions of teacher quality instead of two:

---teacher effectiveness (the degree to which a teacher achieves desired effects upon students) teacher competence includes three main components: interpersonal skills, classroom procedures and subject knowledge. The first component includes parts that can be associated with social competence. This concept has, as its consequence, the teacher's ability to communicate with the student, a positive student approach, understanding students' learning difficulties, acknowledging the individual student, being someone the students can trust.

---- teacher competence (the extent to which a teacher has the knowledge and skills). The second component includes that which in more general terms is called teaching skills, i.e. the ability to organise and teach in interesting and flexible ways, using good teaching methods. Although students' self-confidence and self-conceptions are dependent on many background conditions as well as on earlier school experiences, our understanding is that high teacher competence can lead to positive individual student development. Conversely, an incompetent teacher can adversely affect students' attitudes to learning and lower their self-conceptions. Another assumption is that the more positive students' attitudes to schooling and teacher competence are, the less likely they are to display aggressive behaviour.

--- and teacher performance (how a teacher behaves in the process of teaching). The third component is related to the teachers' subject knowledge and their ability to plan and structure the content. These different components are naturally assumed to be interrelated.

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teachers and school leaders are those who have the greatest influence on the school's inner environment and culture. Hence, the purpose of this article is to probe how student teachers in the English language teaching department see teachers' competence and skills, to which factors they attribute their success and failure in language learning, and what they think the solutions are.

Even though most students in school have a clear notion of their teachers' different capacities, we still lack information regarding the importance of the teacher for student development; to some extent this has been difficult, owing to the many different factors of influence concerned. Nor has one had the necessary methods of analysis at one's disposal in order to distinguish between different sources of variation among teachers (Malm & Lofgren, 2006, p.62). It is reasonable to assume that teacher competence is related to students' attitudes to school work and learning as well as students' self-confidence and self-conceptions. Although students' self-confidence and self-conceptions are dependent on many background conditions as well as on earlier school experiences, our understanding is that high teacher competence can lead to positive individual student development.

When students' perceptions are analysed, it is found out that students vary regarding their perspectives of the teachers: 2nd year students are concerned with student centred issues such as motivation and classroom climate and by 5th year, these concerns have changed, to focus on instructional and management techniques (McCullough and Mintz, 1992). Unlike pre-service teachers, experienced teachers do tend to focus on the organisational and structural aspects of teaching (Kagan and Tippins, 1992). However, there are many teachers who prioritize classroom climate and positive student-teacher interaction. They think they are successful not due to their knowledge or expertise but due to their rapport between themselves and students (Hughes, 1994). In this study, the focus is based on students' perspectives of teacher competence; the teachers' own reflections, albeit significant, have not been explicitly touched upon here.

Method

In this study data is collected in the form of student journals. Students are simply asked to write about issues or experiences that concern them, to write reflectively, and to attempt to write daily. This approach succeeds in generating data which frames the concerns of the student teachers themselves, rather than those that might have been imposed by the researchers. The sample for the study consists of 90 volunteers from the Department of English Language Teaching at Dokuz Eylul University, comprising all of them from the third year undergraduate students.

Data is analysed using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Goetz & Lecompte, 1981; Strauss, 1987). This method involves the separate analysis and coding of each of the journals as a basis for identifying possible categories. Using the process of 'clustering categories' (Goetz & Lecompte, 1981; Miles & Huberman, 1994) are identified through the consolidation of codes.

In this phase of analysis, four primary areas of student teachers' comments about the Practicum experience are identified in the journals: classroom management concerns, characteristics of successful language teaching, the interaction with students, and teachers' competence. Given the unstructured nature of the journals in this study and the broad nature of data deriving from it, the researcher needs a simpler approach and adopts one used by Barry & King (1993), who suggest that teaching comprises three fundamental areas: instruction; management; and relationships. The researcher acknowledges that this division is arbitrary and tends to mask the complex and interactive nature of teaching elements.

Results

Student Teacher Perceptions of Instruction

Student perceptions relating to the issue of instruction are dominant. Table I provides an overview of categories relating to the instruction, and the numbers of journals in which these categories are identified. Each "number" in the table represents a single journal.

Table I: Student teacher perceptions of effective instruction

Features	N	%
Having clear objectives	50	4.5
Meeting needs of all levels of pupils	60	5.4
Teacher enthusiasm	90	8.2

Using interesting activities	80	7.2
Stimulating learning environment	90	8.2
Reinforcement/praise/rewards	75	6.8
Extending higher order thinking	40	3.6
Linking motivation to learning	70	6.3
Variety in lessons/teaching strategies	60	5.4
Having pupils accept responsibility	35	3.1
A sound teacher knowledge base	90	8.2
Awareness of classroom events	50	4.5
Effective pacing of lessons	60	5.4
Evaluating teaching/learning	80	7.2
Teacher patience	86	7.8
Fostering pupil creativity	40	3.6
Having pupils initiate learning	40	3.6
Total	1106	100

Student teachers emphasise teaching skills such as lesson planning, having clear objectives and interesting activities, and instructional skills such as teacher enthusiasm, the use of reinforcement, and teacher motivation of students.

Student Teacher Perceptions of Management

This is concerned with student teacher perceptions relating to classroom organisation and planning, the use of time and resources, and teacher directions of a behavioural rather than an instructional nature. Table II outlines the categories of student perceptions of effective management as they were identified in the journals.

Table II: Student teacher perceptions of classroom management

Features	N	%
authority	80	10.8
preparedness	90	12.2
affection	90	12.2
organization	75	10.1
combination of control and care	84	11.3
fairness	90	12.2
consistent application of rules	90	12.2
having students on tasks	78	10.5
leniency when necessary	60	8.1
Total	737	100

Student teachers think that authority and care and affection should go hand in hand and students should feel the self assertion of the teachers along with their care for students. As long as they over plan and come to the class ready with many activities ready to apply, they think they won't have any predicaments in the class.

Student teacher perceptions of the interaction

Table III provides an overview of the categories of student teacher perceptions of relationships identified in the study.

Table III: student teacher perceptions of the interaction

Features	N	%
affectionate	90	9.8
Caring and loving	90	9.8
enthusiastic	86	9.3
knowledgeable	90	9.8
Sense of humor	75	8.1
Fair to all students even to dislikeable students	80	8.7
cheerful and friendly	75	8.1
Motivating students	85	9.2
Respecting students	80	8.7
Creating a stress-free environment	75	8.1
Providing a positive attitude	90	9.8
Total	916	100

Student teachers wish to see the teachers who care about them, who treat them respectfully, kindly and fairly, who are accessible not only in the class but also outside the class, and who create stress-free environment.

When asked which problem they predict they will have in the class more dominantly, they state that classroom management might be the problem in Table IV.

Table IV: The problems they grapple with at school

Problems	N	%
Classroom management	85	34.69
Authority and leniency	90	36.73
Lack of knowledge or strategies to teach	70	28.57
Total	245	100

But, when asked to identify the most important teacher quality component, the respondents indicate caring of students and their learning (89.6%), teaching skills (83.2%), content knowledge (76.8%), dedication to teaching (75.3%), and verbal skills (75.0%), which shows that for students the most important aspect is the teachers' interaction with them and then comes their competence.

Table V: Students' preferences

Preferences	%
Interaction	89.6
Competence (effective instruction)	83.2
Classroom management	75

When asked whether they think they themselves or teachers are responsible for their failure, their answers are of mainly themselves.

Table VI: who is responsible for the failure

Responsibility	N	%
Teachers	30	33.3
Students themselves	15	16.6
Both	45	50

Discussions

Whilst it is perhaps invidious to place too great a store on the findings of a single-instrument, perception-based piece of research in a single institution (and no suggestion has been given as to the generalisability of the findings), nevertheless, given the important areas of difference, there is much food for reflection here. The research raises more questions, perhaps, than it answers. Should teachers simply acquiesce to students' wishes, even though, in their own judgement, they may not serve what the teachers consider to be the best practice of language learning? Further, given the comment at the start of the paper that practice and beliefs may or may not coincide, or may relate subtly or, indeed orthogonally, future research would need to identify these kinds of relations.

Student teachers are concerned about the fine line between showing authority and creating a caring atmosphere in the class. They believe that they should care about their students, understand them and maintain this perspective and meet the instructional requirements. It takes time for students to handle this issue gently.

The results of this study do support previous findings (Darling-Hammond, 2000; Okpala & Ellis, 2005) that teacher quality is an important educational issue, and that teacher qualification is an important component of teacher quality. It is apparent from this study that quality teachers must embrace the vision of caring for students and their learning. The primary customers of educational organizations are the students, and quality teachers need to be committed to students and their learning goals. Quality teachers must have the ability to use a variety of instructional methods in their classroom to meet students' learning needs, create a relaxing environment and cater for the needs of students regarding language learning, motivation and interests. However, the affective side is thought to be the most important quality teachers should have. Students accept that they are responsible when they fail but believe that if teachers give them enough encouragement and positive feedback, this would increase their desire to study harder.

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