

Beliefs about the effective language teacher: The challenges of training (future) English teachers

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Abstract

Understanding prospective teachers' beliefs and perceptions about the effective foreign language teacher is central to successful teacher training programs. The views teacher trainees bring with them may directly influence the expectations they have of their future profession and their commitment to methodology classes. In a questionnaire three different English teacher trainee groups at a Hungarian university rated their views on the personality traits, professional qualities and classroom management skills of an effective language teacher. Some general support for the importance of most of the listed teacher characteristics was found, with some variation across and within the participant groups and trait types. It is argued that similar questionnaires and data can be effectively used in class discussions or as parts of training sessions on (future) teachers' self-awareness and critical thinking towards their chosen profession.

Introduction

Foreign language teacher training in Hungary has undergone several changes in the past few decades. The particularly accelerated changes in the last few years have resulted in programs running in parallel at BA and MA levels in which students vary in their age, target language proficiency level, teaching experience, expectations and goals. Above all, they have certain beliefs about what makes someone an effective language teacher, which may set the ground to how they view their entire training, how they interpret their class materials and school practices. This variability poses great challenges to trainers and instructors.

Our research stems from the observation that gaining knowledge about students' beliefs may provide instructors with necessary and valuable information concerning the design and implementation of courses in language teacher development programs. Also, learning about the beliefs of our teacher trainees about language learning in general and the language teaching profession in particular leads to our better understanding of our students' expectations of their future profession and their commitment to their language teaching methodology classes.

What constitutes a good or effective teacher has been the target of a large body of research over the past four decades. A growing number of studies report on the views of teachers or students concerning the qualities, skills, characteristics and behaviours of good foreign language teachers (FLTs). These investigations point to the complexity of the question and identify a variety of qualities and characteristics of the good, effective and well-prepared language teacher (e.g. Brown 2009, Çelik et al. 2013, Diab 2009, Mullock 2003, Park and Lee 2006, Shishavan and Sadeghi 2009). While these investigations show some variation in their results depending on the participants' age, nationality and their role in the teaching–learning process, they seem to agree that preparation, good target language proficiency level, positive personality traits and good classroom dynamics have leading roles. Although the idea that teacher trainees' understanding of the effective FLT may interfere with their understanding of the materials and methods presented to them in class is not new (see e.g. Horwitz 1985), there is a

clear lack in the literature concerning Hungarian pre-service EFL teachers' beliefs about good language teachers, although Loch (2006) reports on some general teaching related views.

As language instructors, teacher trainers and applied linguists the authors of the present study work with students of various backgrounds and with diverse expectations. This means that we have BA students who come directly from secondary education, those at teacher training MA studies and also in-service teacher trainees. We have understood that their views and expectations can facilitate or hinder their learning process and shape their attitudes towards their studies and the teaching profession in general.

This paper reports on a study carried out with three different English teacher trainee groups. In a questionnaire students rated their views on the personality traits, professional qualities and classroom management skills of an effective language teacher. Through the analysis of the results it is also discussed how similar questionnaires may serve as a starting point to discussion and spontaneous or guided conversations with students and help the tailoring of the course design to best fit the needs of students.

The study

An exploratory questionnaire study was carried out with three teacher trainee groups in the academic year 2013–2014. We expected that students would give their answers based on their learning experiences, their views on the ideal foreign language teacher and the information they had gained during their methodology training, therefore the participant groups would show marked differences in some of their answers.

The following participant groups were involved in the study:

- 1) new 6-year program teacher trainees, first-year, n=25;
- 2) full-time MA teacher trainees, n=11;
- 3) part-time MA, in-service teacher trainees, n=19;

The first group comprises students who have just left secondary school, therefore are likely to be influenced by their language learning experiences as well as the roles and attitudes of their own former language teachers. The second group, just as the first one, is preparing to become teachers, but they are at an advanced, MA level, with some occasional teaching experience and school teaching practice. The part-time students in the third group are mostly practicing teachers who wish to obtain a higher level degree and, at the same time, refresh their methodology knowledge. They can be considered in-service trainees as many of them have decades of teaching experience. They, therefore, view the teaching profession both from the teachers' and the learners' side.

Since the efficacy of a language teacher is a complex notion, we had to restrict the traits from a large variety of options. The questionnaire was based on our own teaching experience with similar groups of students in language, applied linguistics and methodology classes, our own ideas of a good language teacher and some previous questionnaire-based research (e.g. Koç 2013 and Özmen 2012). Background information concerning the participants' teaching experience was also collected. The list of statements referred to the following three main areas:

- a) teachers' professional knowledge,
- b) personality traits, and

c) classroom management skills.

The subjects were asked to indicate the degree of importance of the statements on a four-point Likert scale as follows: *not important*, *marginally important*, *very important*, *indispensable*. The questionnaire was administered in Hungarian, the native language of the participants. We expected that except for some control questions, the majority of the statements would be categorized as *very important*. Other than looking at some general tendencies in the answers, we concentrated, on the one hand, on the statements that were rated as *not important* or *marginally important* and, on the other hand, on those that were found to be not simply *very important*, but *indispensable*.

Results

We limit our presentation and discussion of the data to general tendencies due to length limitations. This session is organized around the three main groups of teacher characteristics.

Teachers' professional knowledge

While some of the traits were evenly important for all three study groups (such as the effective FLT should know well the target language vocabulary, grammar, have good pronunciation, know a variety of teaching methods and strive for continuous professional development), another group of statements concerning the knowledge of the teacher show a high prevalence of *not important* and *marginally important* answers. The majority of our participants did not find it important that the FLT should be a non-native teacher with good target language proficiency and solid knowledge of the target cultures. It is also of little importance whether the FLT has had a longer stay in one of the target countries or if s/he is a native speaker. The native/non-native dilemma has been a major focus of debate for decades, with a shift towards the preference for well-trained non-native language teachers (see e.g. Árvai and Medgyes 2001, Murphy 2014, Selvi 2011). Surprisingly, our informants did not report that effective FLTs should know their students well or should have sound theoretical background to teaching, although we find both these traits to be fundamental for a well-prepared teacher. Moreover, both during our language classes and methodology courses we emphasize the need that language learners should receive individual, directed attention as much as possible and we connect the teacherly skills and practices with theory.

We were glad to see that a number of other traits were not often placed into these two lower categories of little or no importance. The leading role of good target language vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation, varied teaching methods and continuous professional development is in line with the results of earlier studies (see e.g. Çelik et al. 2001, Mullock 2003, Shishavan and Sadeghi 2009). It seems to be contradictory in our finding though that while the teaching-related theoretical background is not important in our subjects' opinion, a variety of methods should be known and continuous training should be targeted by effective FLTs. This may suggest that prospective teachers look for practice-oriented pre-service and in-service training opportunities. The importance of these last two traits is very much supported by the full-time MA students, as 82% of them indicated *indispensable* on their questionnaire for these background categories (cf. 47% of the in-service teachers' answers and 36% and 24% of the first-year group).

Personality traits

Similarly, the answers referring to the personality traits of teachers show a dual tendency. Some personal characteristics were graded towards the *not important* and *marginally important* end of

the scale, such as the traits *young, experienced, strict, serious* and *has a good sense of humour*. It is interesting to note that while Çelik et al. (2013) found that Turkish university did not consider age to be an important factor, they attached higher values to experience and sense of humour. Mullock (2003) considers sense of humour to be an important factor as well. Regarding our own subjects' opinion we found a difference between the opinions of our first-year and MA students, namely twice as many first-year students considered this trait marginally important than MA students. At the same time most personal characteristics scored high, such as *fair, enthusiastic, friendly, empathetic, patient, creative, flexible, consistent, loving* and *well-prepared*. Our subjects also reported that they find it important that a teacher should admit having made a mistake. The same traits for the effective FLT are reported in other similar studies (see e.g. Shishavan and Sadeghi 2009). It is worth noting that 91% of the full-time MA students rated consistency as an indispensable characteristic of a good language teacher, while only 58% of the in-service teachers and 32% of the first-year trainees did so. The second highest trait in the *indispensable* answers was well-preparedness, with 64% in both full-time trainee groups and 79% in the in-service teacher group.

Classroom management skills

All our study groups attached low importance to using modern technology in the classroom. This may be due to the fact that our current students were raised in a different era and thus they underestimate the advantage provided by classrooms equipped with modern technology, or, on the contrary, they may be afraid of relying too heavily on such teaching aids. As regards using visual aids and familiarising language learners with the target culture, our data show a gradual increase in the number of positive answers in the three groups, the lowest being those of the first-year students, followed by the full-time MA students and finally the in-service teachers. This result seems to indicate that it takes professional practice to recognise that language and culture go hand in hand. For a recent discussion about culture content in language teaching see, for example, Qu (2010) and Ghorbani Shemshadsara (2012). If we take a look at the most strongly supported skills, we find that 82% of the full-time MA students considered the development of listening skills indispensable and 73% of them though the same of speaking skills (cf. 48% for both skills for the first-year and 26% and 47% for the in-service group). The leading position of the full-time MAs is lost in the category of encouragement of active classroom participation, in the case of which in-service teachers are on the top with 73% *indispensable* answers (cf. 44% of the first-year and 53% of the full-time MA group).

It is also interesting to note that none of our study groups voice an unequivocal opinion concerning the use of the learners' mother tongue versus the target language in the classroom. Also, they have not found it important that effective language teachers should take the languages previously learnt by the learners into account, although third language acquisition research has several implications pointing in the direction that the learning (and teaching) of a new foreign language may be facilitated by drawing the language learners' attention to the similarities and differences of the languages already known by them (see e.g. Kallenbach 1998, Köberle 1998, T. Balla 2014).

Conclusion and implication for teacher training

Due to length limitations, only a few selected issues could be discussed here. On the whole we found some general support for the importance of most of the listed characteristics, with some variation across and within the study groups and trait types. Results depict a very conscientious and critical group of full-time MA teacher trainees who rate many of the characteristics on the

positive end of the scale. It seems that the methodology training they have received, their readings on the topic and the little teaching experience they have gained make them critical towards the effective FLT. We hope that this is also a positive outcome of our teacher training. Practicing teachers in our third group, on the contrary, are more tentative in many of their responses and appear to be aware of some of the limitations teachers have in their daily work and are probably also critical to themselves and do not want to set too high standards for themselves. Students in the first-year group have not received methodology training yet, therefore, not surprisingly, see the issue from a student's perspective rather than from that of a prospective teacher. In their answers they voice the experiences they had in language classes and the needs they themselves have in the classroom.

Our results are not generalizable to teacher training as a whole in Hungary or elsewhere, but this was not our main aim with this exploratory study. What we intended to gain is the documentation of the variability in the views and expectations of the trainees and (future) teachers we meet in our methodology and applied linguistics classes. Our results do suggest strongly, however, that gaining knowledge about students' beliefs may provide instructors with necessary and valuable information. We also found that using similar questionnaires and preliminary data can work well as starting points for class discussion or as parts of training sessions to enhance (student) teachers' self-awareness and critical thinking towards the effective foreign language teacher. We plan to continue to apply such methods with future trainee groups at all levels as well as to expand our current research into a longitudinal study.

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