
Learners' Perception of EFL Teachers' Behavior and Knowledge

Soheil Mahmoudi

English Preparatory School, Department of Foreign Languages, Uskudar University, Istanbul, Turkey

Email address:

soheilmahmoudi70@gmail.com, Soheil.mahmoudi@uskudar.edu.tr

To cite this article:

Soheil Mahmoudi. Learners' Perception of EFL Teachers' Behavior and Knowledge. *English Language, Literature & Culture*. Vol. 4, No. 1, 2019, pp. 17-22. doi: 10.11648/j.ellc.20190401.13

Received: July 30, 2018; **Accepted:** December 6, 2018; **Published:** May 15, 2019

Abstract: This study investigated the importance that students accord to behavior and knowledge of teachers. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire with 28 items, fourteen of them, i.e., the odd ones, representing knowledge, and the other fourteen, i.e., the even ones, representing the behavior of teachers, was designed. The values of responses to each question ranged from 1 to 5. One represented the least important and five represented the most important. Copies of the questionnaire were distributed among 26 B1 (pre-intermediate level) prep school students (17 females and 9 males) who had already spent five months with six different teachers at English prep-school at Uskudar University in Istanbul, Turkey. The data were collected in the second week of the third module in the second semester in 2017-2018 academic year. The collected data were then fed to SPSS. A Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test revealed that there was not a significant difference between the importance of knowledge and behavior of teachers from the points of view of the students who attended the study. A Chi-square test also indicated that gender does not play a significant role in assigning importance to teachers' behavior or knowledge by students. The findings of this study could be revealing to teachers.

Keywords: Behavior, Knowledge, Teachers

1. Introduction

1.1. Overview

This survey study was aimed to discover the possible difference in the importance assigned to teachers' knowledge and behavior from students' points of view. The study probed into the effects of the knowledge and behavior of teachers on students' satisfaction. The roles of teachers' behavior and their knowledge in shaping students' satisfaction/dissatisfaction and their ultimate attainment or failure have been broadly studied. However, in many cases students' perspectives on which of these aspects is much more important or matters more to them have not been taken into consideration.

1.2. Statement of the Problem and Significance of the Study

Teachers, according to McDonough and Shaw, are arguably the most important factors in the language teaching operation [22]. The importance of teacher knowledge (theoretical and metalinguistic) is highly emphasized in many

sources either implicitly or explicitly even though the degree of emphasis on different aspects varies from one context to the other [15, 18, 31]. For example, while in general English contexts it is a must that teachers should possess theoretical, methodological, and metalinguistic knowledge in addition to a high command of spoken English, in ESP courses metalinguistic and theoretical types of knowledge are not an issue what so ever. In these contexts what matters is content, genre and rhetorical knowledge on behalf of the teacher. Even slight weakness in general English proficiency of the teacher might be tolerable. [9], for example, state that "Personality, knowledge [content knowledge] and experience are important to a Business English teacher" (p. 59). Or, Scrivener describes attributes such as being supportive, asserting authority, giving correct instructions, appropriate questioning, etc. as key to teachers [30]. On the other hand, in other learning environments such as online gaming communities of practice that Gee discusses, it is not just knowledge but the 'affinity space' that takes priority [13]. However, one thing is missing in almost all of these sources: which of these factors (knowledge or behavior of the teacher)

is much more important to students. From the content of the books and articles published on these issues, it is clear that they are dealt with either from theoretical or descriptive point of view. That is, seldom are students asked to express their opinions on these issues and say whether it is the knowledge or the behavior of teachers that matters more to them or whether they assign the same amount of importance to both of them. This study aimed at addressing this issue. The importance of the study arises from the fact that it looks at the issue from a different vantage point and although the study is not an ethnographic one, it provides a kind of emic or insider view to the issue under investigation.

1.3. Design of the Study

The study employed an ex-post-facto design in that no variable was manipulated during the study. The data were collected through passing out copies of a questionnaire and without any intervention before the distribution of the questionnaire copies. Nor any intentional attempt was made to affect the response patterns of the respondents.

1.4. Research Questions and Hypotheses

The present study tried to answer the following research questions:

RQ₁: Do students think that knowledge of a teacher is more important than his or her behavior or vice versa?

RQ₂: Does gender make any difference in students' judgments about the importance of teachers' behavior and knowledge?

The following null hypotheses were drawn from the above research questions.

H0₁: Students think that there is no difference in importance between the knowledge and behavior of a teacher.

H0₂: Gender makes no difference in students' judgments about the importance of teachers' behavior and knowledge.

1.5. Variables of the Study

This study had two continuous dependent variables including knowledge and behavior of teachers and one categorical variable, namely gender of the respondents. Of course, to test the second null hypothesis, knowledge and behavior were treated as the two levels of another categorical variable called teachers' attributes.

2. Review of the Related Literature

2.1. Introduction

This survey study was designed to explore the degree of the importance of teachers' knowledge and behavior from students' perspectives and their impact on their academic success. The impetus behind the study was the idea that most researchers are likely to think that it is the teacher's knowledge that matters more to students.

2.2. Knowledge

Regarding the fact that teaching is helping others learn

about something, teachers' subject matter knowledge is therefore a crucial requirement. There are counterarguments however claiming that learning is more important than teaching, in a way downplaying the role of teacher. Lewis and Hill, for example, state that "The single most important factor to remember, however, is that teaching is not the terminal objective of what happens in the classroom [20]. In the end, it is changes in the students' behavior upon which success and failure depend" (p. 8). Teacher knowledge is also seen by some other researchers as just one aspect of a teacher's complex mental life or cognition that determines the way he or she teaches [24].

One of the most significant components to be a professional teacher is having deep knowledge about the subject matter. If teachers try to teach something to the students, they need to have profound understanding about what it is to be taught. Having valuable subject matter knowledge plays a great role in selecting learning activities, preparing different tasks for teaching, giving good explanations, asking to the point questions and assessing pupils' learning [1]. Jack C. Richards considers teacher's role as essential in the implementation of change to curriculum and even compensating for the poor quality of resources [28]. As Richards puts it, "teachers may vary according to the following dimensions:

1. proficiency
2. teaching experience
3. skill and expertise
4. training and qualifications
5. morale and motivation
6. teaching style
7. beliefs and principles" (p. 99).

As it is evident, most of these factors are closely related to teacher knowledge even though some of them might be loosely connected with teacher behavior. Also, as Richards and Rodgers state, although some materials do not require special expertise or proficiency on part of the teacher, others require specially trained and near-native teachers [29].

Teaching and helping pupils learn a subject matter is more than saying and explaining facts. The purpose of teaching is to make students participate actively in the class. For these reasons, a teacher should have a good knowledge of the subject matter. When he or she does not have such a command, they may transmit wrong information to students [1]. This kind of error is called induced error or error of instruction [10].

Describing the accepted truth is not enough for effective learning, rather, a good teacher should explain different aspects of a matter using different styles and techniques [32, 36]. Woodward devotes a few chapters only to this subject [38], but Scrivener warns us not to go too far as substituting entertainment for teaching [30]. As he puts it "there is a fine line between creating a good rapport in the class and becoming an entertainer" (p. 14).

Teachers' life and teaching experience that's formed both in and out of school can help them better facilitate learning as students' learning does not only take place at school but also

in community and family [1, 6, 30].

Knowledge for a teacher is not something that can be achieved once and for all. Studying, experiencing and reflecting are the constant processes that a teacher should go through to avoid the challenges of boredom and staleness. However, as was quoted earlier from Nation and Macalister, although knowledge plays a significant role in successful teaching, it is only one aspect of teaching [24].

2.3. Behavior

Teachers' manner can both have a good or bad effect on students' learning. The importance of humor and fun in the classroom has been highlighted by many including [4, 21, 30]. According to the aforementioned researchers, students enjoy the lesson more when there is a lot of fun and humor in the class.

According to Latta, laughter engages students in class activities and keeps them motivated about the subject matter [19]. McGhee and Goldstein in their study concluded that humor and laughter effectively reduce students' tension and stress and prepare their brain for learning interesting and complex matters [23]. More to the point, the connection between laughter and academic success has been highlighted by Hickman and Crossland and Makewa et al. [16, 21]. However, as Scrivener highlighted, teachers should be on their guard not to be viewed as entertainers in the classroom by their students [30]. Along the same lines, Lewis and Hill [20] state that "useful and fun is better than either alone" (p. 18).

Neuliep believes that good behavior of a teacher and a happy atmosphere made in the class by him make the classroom much more relaxing and comforting that results in satisfaction and quality learning [25]. Keeping the students motivated during a course is not possible without good behavior of a teacher that can effectively reduce their anxiety [27, 33].

Having a good and positive teacher-students relationship is another factor that affects classroom management and effective learning [5, 11, 12, 17]. The technical term for the good and positive relationship between students and teachers is 'rapport', which according to Richards is one and may be the most important classroom teaching skill [28]. Other skills in this category are: developing motivation, adjusting the language to meet the level and needs of the learners, giving clear instructions, checking students' understanding, and so on.

Cooper believes that empathy develops students' morality and expands their self-esteem and learning. Kind and emotional teachers fire their students' motivation and generate morality in their personal interactions, and good interactions can obviously help them in learning. Interrelationship between thought and language remind us of the unity of affect and cognition [7]. The more a teacher shows affection to a student the more effectively the student learns [7, 34]. Empathy is not only effective in modeling, self-development and interaction between the teacher and the students but is also crucial in quality learning [7].

Context is of course crucial in affecting the degree of empathy shown by the teacher [7]. Brain is believed to grow better when it is cared for and supported and conversely a lack of care tends to produce a shutting down of self and withdrawal from learning. A good interaction between the tutor and learners can only happen in an appropriate context. Hedge is of the view that we have to consider characteristics of the learning situation including social and educational factors [22]. Elements of context that affect students' learning through individualization of teaching are important factors in LSP [22]. Therefore, a good learning context is as important as positive interaction [37].

Affect has long been a major concern in language teaching and teachers have always been seen as the caterers of affective needs of their students. For this reason affective objectives are numbered among the three types of educational objectives in [35]. The other two objectives are cognitive and psychomotor.

Kind and Energetic teachers can have a positive impression on the learners and they grow to like and respect such teachers and emulate their behavior; thus, they become their role models. We brought up the concept of rapport or friendly relationship between the teacher and student above. Brown [2] introduces methods to set up such a connection including:

1. showing interest in each student as a person
2. giving feedback on each student's progress
3. soliciting for students' ideas and feelings
4. valuing students' ideas
5. laughing with them but not laughing at them
6. working with them, and not against them, and
7. showing joy when they learn something or succeed

2.4. Surveys

Brown refers to surveys in language studies as ways of collecting data about the nature of language or learning through the use of oral interviews or written questionnaires [3]. In interviews, according to Dörnyei, someone actually conducts a live interview through reading out a set of fixed questions and marking the respondents' answers on an answer sheet [8]. But, in paper and pencil questionnaires the answer sheets are filled by the respondents themselves.

Surveys are very useful tools for gathering sufficient data in a short time with little cost but data gathered by questionnaires can be unreliable if the respondents do not provide reliable information. On the other hand, as Dörnyei points out, the collected data can be superficial [8]. There are techniques, however, to enhance the reliability of the collected data by for example asking multiple questions about the same construct with different wordings or reverse coding of some items in the scale.

3. Method

3.1. Participants

The participants of this study were all preparatory students

in Uskudar University, in Istanbul, Turkey. All of the students were 18 to 21 years old. They were all in their second module at B1 level. They had all studied and passed A2 level in the first module after being placed as A2 level prep-school students according to their university proficiency exam grades. From the 26 respondents to the questionnaire, 17 were females and 9 were males. The first language of all 26 students was Turkish except for one of them whose L1 was Arabic.

3.2. Instruments

Two instruments were used in this study. The first instrument was a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire including 28 questions, fourteen of them, namely the odd ones, addressing teacher knowledge and the other fourteen, namely the even ones, addressing teacher behavior. All of the questions were derived from research papers and a balance was established with respect to the number of questions addressing each feature type. The values of responses to each question ranged from 1 to 5. One represented the least important and five represented the most important. The questionnaire was designed to give the fullest possible coverage to the variables that, according to the literature on the field, determine the qualities of a good teacher.

The second instrument used was the SPSS package that was used to analyze the collected data. SPSS was used both for descriptive and inferential analyses.

3.3. Procedure

The data were collected in Uskudar University English preparatory school, in Istanbul, Turkey. All of the participants were in their first year of university and were preparing themselves for English proficiency exam to go to their departments. They were all B1 (pre-intermediate) level students in their second module in the first semester. The participants attended two classes. A five-point Likert scale questionnaire with 28 questions, 14 of them pointing to the importance of teacher behavior, and the other fourteen pointing to the importance of teacher knowledge, was given to the students. The data were collected in just one session. Of course, the questionnaire was test piloted with five similar students before being used with the actual respondents. Also, the soundness of the questions in the questionnaire were examined by two colleagues of the researchers for validity assurance. The reliability of the questionnaire was calculated running the Chronbach alpha test which proved to be equal to .88.

4. Data Analysis

To test the first research hypothesis, it was necessary to check for the normality of the distributions of scores first. The 1-sample KS tests run on the aggregate scores of the respondents on knowledge and behavior revealed that with p values smaller than .05 both sets of scores were skewed and therefore running the Paired-samples T-test to compare the means of the two sets of scores was not allowed.

Table 1. Normality Tests Run on Knowledge and Behavior Scores.

	Knowledge	behavior
N	26	26
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.042 ^c	.019 ^c

Fortunately, Paired-samples T-test has a non-parametric alternative called Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test that can be used when one or more of the assumptions of this test are not satisfied. Table 2 shows the results of the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test. The Z value in this table is the value for the z-approximation test, which is a correction for ties in the data [26]. But, the most important value is the p value which is equal to .26 meaning that from the respondents points of view behavior and knowledge of a teacher are almost equally important. In other words, there was no significant difference between the scores that the respondents assigned to the importance of behavior and knowledge of teachers.

Table 2. Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test.

	behavior - knowledge
Z	-1.129 ^b
Asymp. Sig. (2-tailed)	.259

When the difference between two sets of scores is significant, it is important to determine the direction of the difference. That is, to show which set of scores had a larger mean. To know about this, we need to look at the Ranks Table that is created by SPSS whenever we run the Wilcoxon-signed Ranks test. But, since the difference between our two sets of scores was not significant, we have omitted this table here.

Our finding about the importance assigned to teachers' knowledge and behavior pushes us to accept our first hypothesis and conclude that unlike some speculations to the contrary that give priority to teachers' knowledge, from the respondents' points of view in the current study knowledge and behavior of teachers are almost equally important.

The second null hypothesis was formulated to see if gender had any significant effect on the respondents' answers in relation to knowledge and behavior of teachers. Actually, the objective was to explore the relationship between gender as one categorical variable with the two levels of male and female and teacher attribute as the other categorical variable with the two levels of knowledge and behavior. Our test of choice in this case was the Chi-square test for independence. The model was 2 by 2 with Yate's correction for continuity which compensates for the over-estimation of the Chi-square test when the model is 2 by 2. Table 3 or the cross-tabulation table represents the proportion of cases falling in each cell in the model.

*Table 3. Crosstabulation of Gender * Knowledge or Behavior.*

		knowledge or behavior		Total
		knowledge	behavior	
gender	male	5	4	9
	female	10	7	17
Total		15	11	26

Results of the Chi-square test are given in Table 4 below. Obviously, the *Sig* value is larger than .05, which means that

the relationship between gender and teacher attributes of knowledge and behavior is non-significant.

Table 4. Chi-square Run to Explore the Association between Gender and Teacher Attributes.

	Value	df	Asymp. Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (2-sided)	Exact Sig. (1-sided)
Pearson Chi-Square	.026 ^a	1	.873		
Fisher's Exact Test				1.000	.598
N of Valid Cases	26				

The finding convinces us to accept our second hypothesis as well. Then, the analyses in general revealed two things:

1. Knowledge and behavior of a teacher are almost equally important.
2. Students' judgments about the importance of teachers' behavior and knowledge are not affected by their gender.

5. Discussion

The two hypotheses of this study were to assess two things: first whether the importance that students accord to a teacher's knowledge outweighs the importance that they assign to his/her behavior or the other way round and second if gender affects the way respondents assess the importance of these two factors. Knowledge and behavior both have different aspects to them and it was tried to give a relatively full coverage to these aspects in the questionnaire that was designed for the data collection purpose.

Knowledge is an attribute of a teacher that can relatively easily be assessed either by requesting a reliable certificate or by direct measurement of the applicant's skills and metalinguistic knowledge. Intuitively, knowledge is also considered to be more important than the personality or behavior of a teacher when it comes to his or her employment. Behavior, on the other hand is an attribute that usually surfaces in the process of teaching and there is no guarantee that the first impression of the recruiting staff will prove to be correct. Also, while a degree of misconduct, such as late arrivals or absenteeism, might be tolerated in favor of high proficiency or knowledge, polite behavior cannot redress a lack of knowledge.

The point, however, is that these approaches are the ideologies prevalent among the members of administrative bodies and they may apply to different situations differently. Looked at the issue from the eyes of students, we may come up with a completely different ideology. This might be because it is affect that takes priority for students. Many studies have shown that fun, laughter and feelings of security and rapport are very important for students learning [4, 5, 11, 12, 17, 19, 21, 23, 25, 27, 30, 33] and it is only after these conditions are fulfilled that students open up their minds to new information.

Characteristics of the context and whether the teaching process is tailored to the needs of the learners, what is technically called individualization, are also important from many researchers' perspectives [7, 14, 22].

However, all these do not mean that knowledge is secondary. Many scholars recognize knowledge as the foremost

requirement of a good teacher [1, 10, 28, 32, 36, 38]. Even students at higher levels may prefer more knowledgeable teachers than kinder ones. Again, there are differences in definitions. One student might consider an exacting teacher a responsible one while another student might consider him or her as overbearing. Although both refer to almost the same characteristic, value assignments are completely at odds with each other. Therefore, issues are complex and ideologies vary as we move from one context to the other and even when we ask different people in the same institution.

6. Conclusion

Findings of this study carry the message that the knowledge variable should not be overestimated at the expense of the affective variable of behavior. Data collected from the respondents of this study reveal that behavior of a teacher is as important as his or her knowledge to them. These findings might reflect a general pattern, however, and lack generalizability. The reason for this claim is that the respondents of the study were students at a relatively low level of proficiency. We know that at low levels, taking care of students' feelings is much more important than the transference of knowledge. But as the students progress in their proficiency, they usually prefer a more competent teacher even if he or she is not as kind or fun as they might expect. A better study, therefore, might be questioning students at different levels of proficiency and seeing if the outcome of responses changes. Also, there is the question of whether students should be given the credit to have a say in certifying teachers or not.

References

- [1] Ball, D. L., & McDiarmid, G. W. (1989). The subject matter preparation of teachers. *The National Center for Research on Teacher Education*, 89 (4), 5–35.
- [2] Brown, H. D. (2001). *Teaching by principles*. NY: Longman.
- [3] Brown, J. D. (2001). *Using surveys in language programs*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Burgess, R. (2000). *Laughing Lessons: 149 2/3 Ways to Make Teaching and Learning Fun*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing Co.
- [5] Chafouleas, S. M., Hagermoser Sanetti, L. M., Jaffery, R., & Fallon, L. M. (2012). An evaluation of a class-wide intervention package involving self-management and a group of contingency on classroom behavior of middle school students. *Journal of Behavioral Education*, 21 (1), 34–57.

- [6] Cohen, D. K. (1985). Teaching practice: Plus ça change... In P. Jackson (Ed.), *Contributing to educational change: Perspectives on research and practice* (pp. 1-45). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan.
- [7] Cooper, B. (2002). *Teachers as Moral Models? The Role of Empathy in Teacher/Pupil Relationships*. PhD thesis, Leeds Metropolitan University.
- [8] Dörnyei, Z. (2003). *Questionnaires in second language research*. New York: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- [9] Dudley-evans, T., & Jo St John, M. (1998). *Developments in English for specific purposes*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [10] Ellis, R. (2008). *The study of second language acquisition* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- [11] Emmer, E. T., & Gerwels, M. (2006). Classroom management in middle and high school classrooms. In C. M. Evertson, C. S. Weinstein (Eds.), *Handbook of classroom management: Research, practice, and contemporary issues* (pp. 407-437). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers.
- [12] Freiberg, H. J., Huzince, C. A., & Templeton, S. M. (2009). Classroom management—A pathway to student achievement: A study of fourteen inner-city elementary schools. *Elementary School Journal, 110* (1), 63-80.
- [13] Gee, J. P. (1999). *Discourse analysis: Theory and method*. New York: Routledge.
- [14] Hedge, T. (2000). *Teaching and learning in language classroom*. Oxford: Oxford University press
- [15] Hellermann, J. (2008). *Social actions for classroom learning*. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd.
- [16] Hickman, G. P., & Crossland, G. L. (2004). The Predictive Nature of Humor, Authoritative Parenting Style, and Academic Achievement on Indices of Initial Adjustment and Commitment to College among College Freshmen. *Journal of College Student Retention, Research Theory and Practice, 6* (2) 225-245. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2190/UQ1B-0UBD-4AXC-U7WU>
- [17] Jackson, A. W., & Davis, G. A. (2000). *Turning points 2000: Educating adolescents in the 21st century*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- [18] Johnson, K. E. (2009). *Second language teacher education*. New York: Routledge.
- [19] Latta, R. L. (1998). *The basic humor process: A cognitive-shift theory and the case against incongruity*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.
- [20] Lewis, M., & Hill, J. (1985). *Practical techniques for language teaching*. London: Commercial Color Press.
- [21] Makewa, L. N., Role, E., & Genga, J. A. (2011). Teachers' Use of Humor in Teaching and Students' Rating of Their Effectiveness. *International Journal of Education, 3* (2), 1-17.
- [22] McDonough, J., & Shaw, C. (2003). *Materials and methods in ELT*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing.
- [23] McGhee, P. E., & Goldstein, J. H. (1983). *Handbook of humor research* (Vol. 1). New York: Springer-Verlag.
- [24] Nation, I. S. P., & Macalister, J. (2010). *Language curriculum design*. New York: Routledge.
- [25] Neuliep, J. W. (1991). An examination of the content of high school teacher's humor in the classroom and the development of an inductively derived taxonomy of classroom humor. *Communication Education, 40*, 343-355. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03634529109378859>
- [26] Pallant, J. (2013). *SPSS survival manual*. New York: Open University Press.
- [27] Powers, T. (2005). Engaging students with humor. *Observer, 18* (12), 13-24.
- [28] Richards, J. C. (2001). *Curriculum development in language teaching*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- [29] Richards, J. C., & Rodgers, T. S. (2001). *Approaches and methods in language teaching*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [30] Scrivener, J. (2011). *Learning teaching: The essential guide to English language teaching* (3rd ed.). New York: MacMillan books for Teachers.
- [31] Scrivener, J. (2012). *Classroom management techniques*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [32] Shulman, L. S. (1986). Those who understand: Knowledge growth in teaching. *Educational Researcher, 15* (2), 4-14.
- [33] Verma, G. (2007). *Humor: A good teaching aid*. Visakhapatnam: The Hindu Education Plus
- [34] Vygotsky, L. S. (1986). *Thought and language*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- [35] White, R. (1988). *The ELT curriculum*. New York: Basil Blackwell Ltd.
- [36] Wineburg, S. S., & Wilson, S. M. (1988). Models of wisdom in the teaching of history *Phi Delta Kappan, 70* (1), 50-58.
- [37] Winkley, D. (1996). Towards the human school: Principles and practice. Paper presented to the conference, Beyond Market Forces - Creating the Human School. West Hill College, Birmingham.
- [38] Woodward, T. (2001). *Planning lessons and courses*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.