

Iranian English Language High School Teachers in Focus: Perceptions, Beliefs, and Challenges

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ABSTRACT

The current qualitative study aimed to explore how Iranian high school English language teachers define the characteristics of a good language teacher. Besides, the study focused on the challenges teachers face in their classes. Five male and female EFL teachers volunteered to participate in the study in focused group interviews for three sessions, each for about two hours. The focus group interview contained two open-ended questions, which allowed the participants to discuss the issues in focus. This paper discusses the topics proposed by the participants and provides some suggestions for improving the teaching profession. The study has implications for teachers, teacher trainers, educators, and policymakers.

KEYWORDS: EFL teachers, a good teacher, good teaching, focus group interview.

1. INTRODUCTION

The teaching profession is a multi-dimensional, multi-level career. Educational systems owe their success to teachers who work in the numerous institutions which shape a country's education. Teaching at schools requires dealing with students, parents, administrators, and teacher-trainers, only to mention a few. Meeting the expectations of several sides involved in education is an inseparable part of teaching, which puts an additional burden on teachers' shoulders and requires their psychological well-being besides their expertise in the content of the lessons they teach.

Continuous in-service training seems necessary because, besides gaining education and training, teachers participate in communities that give them self-confidence, where they can share ideas and find solutions to their teaching problems. Teachers need to recapitulate the essence of their profession and the characteristics that constitute a good teacher. They should be able to associate such attributes with themselves and the teaching environments.

Several schools of thought have attempted to provide a picture of what constitutes efficient teaching. However, defining how to be a good teacher is not easy since several psychological, biological, social, and cognitive factors affect teachers as they affect human beings. Multiple researchers have investigated factors that can influence teaching and have ascribed diverse characteristics to the idea of a good teacher.

One such attribute is reflective teaching, which has been identified as a crucial factor in the teaching-learning process and has received much attention (Joze Tajareh & Rashtchi, 2019). The idea dates back to Dewey (1933), who believed that through reflection, teachers could provide opportunities for better thinking and thus foster student learning. Related to reflective teaching is Kumaravadivelu's (1994, 2003) postmethod and Hawkins and Norton's (2009) critical pedagogy, theories that try to portray different aspects of teaching and add to the general understanding of the teaching profession.

Through reflective teaching, teachers are encouraged to think critically, cultivate thinking in their classes, and re-think and revise their classroom practices. Reflective teaching can foster students' thinking skills and teach them to evaluate their learning, solve problems, and make decisions, tenets embedded in critical thinking principles (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2020).

Another view in the English Language Teaching domain is the postmethod pedagogy proposed by Kumaravadivelu (2006), which relies on postmodernist views and has reflective teaching in its background. Criticizing the role of methods in language teaching, Kumaravadevelu emphasizes the role of teachers as agents who should implement practices based on principled pragmatism, which gives freedom to teachers to decide

about their classroom procedures based on the context of teaching. In his view, teachers' beliefs, needs, and the context of teaching could be decisive in their choice of techniques, strategies, and classroom activities. Kumaravadivelu questions the existence of methods and believes that educators' and scholars' responsibility is the quest for an alternative to method rather than an alternative method (Rashtchi & Keyvanfar, 2007).

On the other hand, critical pedagogy having its roots in Freire's (1974) viewpoints regarding social change, views teachers as individuals whose responsibility is to promote an understanding of power relations and how they work in society and affect the educational system, which systematically ignores marginalized groups and minorities (Hawkins & Norton, 2009). Predicting the characteristics of a good teacher might not seem difficult at first sight; however, the feasibility of being a good teacher and the challenges teachers face for being "good" is the concern of the current study. This study attempts to explore the teaching profession from teachers' perspectives.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Teachers' roles change with the appearance of schools of thought related to pedagogy. Teacher-centered classes, resulting from traditional approaches to English Language Teaching, gave way to learner-centered courses assuming a new position for teachers in the classroom (Rashtchi & Keyvanfar, 2007). Besides, teachers should be flexible as new strategies, techniques, and methods are integrated into the teaching process. Adopting the Activity theory framework (Cowan & Butler, 2013), implementing technology in English classes which is widespread nowadays (Johnson et al., 2016), and learner autonomy (Wiraningsih & Santosa, 2020) are only a few examples that show how teachers are constantly expected to modify their practices. Besides, teachers' characteristics such as job satisfaction (Li et al., 2023), self-efficacy (Rashtchi, 2020; Zhang, 2022), burnout (Maslach, 1993), and identity (Wang et al., 2021) are factors that affect the teaching profession and portray the challenges teachers face in their career.

Thus, teacher education programs' primary responsibility is to provide opportunities for teachers to accept new roles and responsibilities in their classes rather than simply focusing on improving their content knowledge. Teacher training programs as ongoing processes should help teachers develop insights into pedagogy besides promoting competencies in related subject matters. Teachers need to practice reflecting on their teaching and students' learning and be ready to welcome the changes caused by improvements in the pedagogy and incorporate them into the routines of their classes.

Prabhu (1990) assumed the sense of plausibility as a role for teachers. Teachers need to develop a sense of plausibility to construct personal theories of teaching and learning, leading to their individual and professional growth. For Prabhu, teaching is not a scientific act but a personal deed through which teachers decide how to act in the classroom and create conditions in which learners are encouraged to get involved in interactions (Maley, 2018). However, accomplishing such a role might not be easy for teachers, and they need guidelines and models to cultivate it.

Therefore, besides subject matter competency, teachers' insights and perceptions should also evolve. The In-Service Teacher Training (INSET) program is one way to improve teachers' thinking about teaching. This teacher preparation program can enhance teachers' knowledge about technology, pedagogy, and content, defined as teachers' knowledge base, known as TPACK (Mahmoudi et al., 2021). Prospective teachers learn how to integrate technology, pedagogy, and content of the subject matter they teach to manage their classes. INSET classes are usually context-sensitive depending on sociocultural contexts. The typical characteristic of such courses is promoting teachers' knowledge base. However, reports on the function of such classes for Iranian EFL teachers show their inefficiency (Eghtesadi & Hassanabadi, 2016; Hashemian & Azadi, 2014; Mahmoudi et al., 2019). Thus, what is necessary is re-conceptualizing views on the characteristics of good teaching and what a successful INSET program should offer for training good teachers. The content of such programs should accord with what teachers need aligning with the expectations English Language Teaching pedagogy puts on their shoulders. Thus, studying the cognition and beliefs that underlie teachers' behaviors (Verloop et al., 2001) can contribute to understanding "what it means to teach a second language, what informs the learning-to-teach process, how language teachers develop understandings of their subject matter, and how this process influences teachers' perceptions of themselves as second language teachers" (Vélez-Rendón, 2002, p. 465).

Researchers have proposed models for defining language teacher education to provide a guideline for evaluating the teaching and learning situation (Deyrich & Stunnen, 2014). One such model is proposed by Richards (1987), who believed in micro and macro approaches for developing teaching theories and teacher preparation

programs' principles. As an analytic approach, the micro approach considers teaching an observable phenomenon based on teachers' activities in the classroom. Thus, teacher education follows a competency-based process that can be investigated via the process-product approach.

On the other hand macro approach adopts a holistic view based on the activities that prepare teachers for teaching, such as self and peer observation, discussion activities, and practical teaching, which can help teachers develop their teaching skills (Richards, 1987). Therefore, Richards views a good teacher as someone who can define the language teaching process, theorize what effective language teaching is, and conceptualize the fundamentals of language teacher education.

Another model proposed by Freeman (1989) views language teacher education as a combination of knowledge and skills affected by attitude and awareness. In the model, knowledge refers to knowing the content, students and their characteristics, and the teaching context. Teachers' skills, another essential part of teachers' knowledge base, comprise what a teacher can do, such as presenting materials, correcting errors, and managing the classroom environment.

An influential model that attempted to theorize teacher education is Deyrich and Stunel's (2014), which introduces transmission and collaborative models as two models of language education which "stem from different views about the nature of knowledge and how it is acquired" (p. 89). The transmission model suggests conveying experts' knowledge to learners to prepare student teachers for their future careers. This model supports Richards' (1987) micro approach and Freeman's (1989) teacher training approach. The transmission model does not view teaching as an individual or intuitive act but as a practice based on rules and principles drawn from existing theories (Ahmadian & Maftoon, 2016). These models restrict language teacher education to knowledge and skills (Freeman, 1989), considering teachers' passive knowledge recipients who can be successful if they follow different teaching steps within a method's framework. Thus, good teachers have learned how to implement what they have learned during training.

Deyrich and Stunel's (2014) collaboration model invests in the construction of knowledge during interaction with peers, which helps them develop the required cognitive system. This model assumes that teachers are active individuals and can promote their teaching competence, skills, and knowledge base. This model is associated with the teacher development perspective based on the belief that teacher learners would have more opportunities to enhance their teaching abilities, skills, and knowledge base. Overall, the models reflect the different views of teaching and show different perceptions regarding good teachers with the ultimate goal of providing teachers with opportunities to act successfully in their profession.

The teacher education domain witnesses a shift from advocating methods of teaching which are generalizable to all environments to encouraging teachers to feel responsible and autonomous in deciding how to teach in their classes. They should reflect on their teaching, follow self-assessment, and analyze the outcomes of their classroom practices. The sociocultural perspective that associates human cognition with social activities (Johnson, 2009) gives teaching a new meaning implying that teaching is not the transition of knowledge but a process to allow learners to shape their cognition via social engagement and using culturally constructed materials to obtain higher-order thinking skills.

The current study explored Iranian EFL teachers' perspectives regarding the factors that constitute a good teacher. The objective was to understand how Iranian teachers define a good teacher. The study also intended to explore the obstacles to achieving the ideal characteristics. The ultimate goal was to shed light on the problems of being a good teacher and find out how to resolve such issues. The researcher assumed that although the issues addressed in the current study are situation dependent, all teachers worldwide might gain insights from other teachers' viewpoints. Being aware of teaching challenges can help teachers worldwide to develop a sense of empathy and feel they are not alone. This qualitative study might have merits for Iranian and non-Iranian English teachers, teacher trainers, and educators. The following research questions led the study:

RQ1: How do Iranian high school teachers perceive the characteristics of a good teacher?

RQ2: What are the challenges of being a good teacher?

3. METHOD

Participants

The participants were five male and female English teachers who had volunteered to participate in the study. Two had B.A. in TEFL, two had M.A. in TEFL, and one was a Ph.D. candidate of TEFL. Their teaching experience was more than ten years, and they had taught English at the high school level. Two of them had the

experience of teaching English in language institutes in Tehran, where the study was conducted. Their ages ranged from 32 to 45, and they all had learned English in Iran and had no experience living abroad. They agreed to participate in the interviews and signed a consent form before the advancement of the study.

Instrument

The teachers participated in focus group interviews for three sessions, each about two hours. The teachers' voices were recorded and transcribed for analysis. The researcher used focus group because it is a typical data collection instrument when the purpose is to collect data about individuals' perceptions, beliefs, and ideas (Stewart & Shamdasani, 1990). As Krueger and Casey (2000) stated, focus group interviews are more realistic and natural because respondents share ideas and are encouraged by the group members. It looks like a community in which individuals inspire and are inspired by others. The researcher asked an experienced university professor to moderate the sessions and organize the discussions. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. The researcher asked the participants to review the transcribed version and verify the content. The focus group questions were content validated by two university professors for their relevance.

Procedure

The participants agreed to participate in the interviews, which took three two-hour sessions a week. The first session began with a five-minute introduction by the moderator about the teaching profession and how research studies could contribute to understanding it. Then she asked the teachers to introduce themselves. The moderator tried to create a friendly atmosphere. She ensured the participants could leave the interviews whenever they disliked participating. The participants were informed about the purposes of the study and were asked to express their ideas when they felt they were ready.

The participants talked about themselves and their working experiences before the moderator asked the first research question. Two of the participants also spoke about their children and their studies at the university. The first session took about 150 minutes, the second 120 minutes, and the last 100 minutes. The first research question caused long discussions on the nature of teaching, the challenges, and complaints during which the moderator skillfully tried to direct the talks and encourage the participants to focus on the issue. The second research question moved smoothly as the teachers almost repeated what they had stated before.

Findings

RQ1: How do you [Iranian high school teachers] perceive the characteristics of a good teacher?

Commitment is the Prerequisite and the Foremost Requirement of Teaching

The first question asked about the participants' viewpoints regarding the most crucial characteristic an English teacher should possess. All the focus group members believed commitment was the most important characteristic a teacher should have. They defined commitment as loving students and the job, being motivated to improve, and feeling responsible for affecting other teachers' improvement. They thought the school climate, consisting of staff, colleagues, and principals, could affect teachers' commitment. They believed the pressure at the workplace resulting from dealing with students, parents, and administrators and trying to satisfy them necessitates extraordinary resilience and patience. Only teachers' devotion to their job can help them cope with such pressures. They valued the administrators' and principals' politeness, respect, and social conduct. They asserted that teachers' efforts should be recognized and appreciated. Such values were considered more important than financial support because they gave teachers a sense of belief in themselves and led to job satisfaction.

Self-efficacy is a Must and Protects Teachers from Burnout

Another factor the teacher mentioned was self-efficacy. Teachers should be self-confident and believe in their abilities to teach and develop students' personalities, knowledge, and skills. The participants felt that the teaching community, consisting of administrators, policymakers, and parents, is decisive in helping teachers gain self-efficacy. Teachers should believe in themselves and the impact their instructions have on students. They should remember that self-efficacy can positively affect students and make teachers role models for them.

The participants also considered self-efficacy a two-fold feature, an inner layer stemming from teachers' inner feelings and an outer layer deriving from the social environment. The positive attitude of the school staff and parents can stimulate teachers' self-efficacy and prevent the occurrence of teacher burnout. Being supported at the workplace helps them overcome problems and helps them in their endeavor to create a productive teaching environment. The respondents asserted that teaching is a demanding responsibility; teachers should always be ready to change their classroom routines and adopt new ways of teaching. If the teaching environment does not support them, they will lose motivation, and burnout will occur.

Reflectivity in Teaching Leads to Success, Self-efficacy, and Job Satisfaction

The participants emphasized the role of reflective teaching in keeping teachers alive. They believed that giving space to teachers to think and decide about their activities in the class helps them accept the responsibility and thus stimulates them to become successful teachers. Teachers' reflectivity also helps them free themselves from the pressures they experience regarding violating the classroom techniques imposed by supervisors and administrators. The sense of autonomy provided by reflective teaching encourages job satisfaction and promotes teachers' self-efficacy. The idea of "one size fits all" related to following specific techniques and strategies in English classes imposes an extra burden on teachers; however, reflective teaching helps teachers adjust teaching techniques to the context of teaching and tailor English classes to learners' needs, expectations, and interests.

Leadership a Key to Becoming a Successful Teacher

Another characteristic mentioned by teachers was leadership at work. Good teachers should volunteer to develop extracurricular activities and use technological resources to encourage student learning. They should be a source of appreciation for students who struggle to learn the language. Teachers objected to being passive at work with no creativity or innovation. The participants believed that resourceful teachers could motivate other colleagues to change language learning to a social activity.

The respondents highlighted the role of in-service training and thought that INSET classes should have a decisive role in cultivating teacher leadership. Such courses should familiarize teachers with advancements in methods, techniques, and strategies. Besides, the programs should help them learn about integrating technology into their classes. The interviewees also suggested that schools hold workshops to promote teachers' teaching styles, language proficiency, and technological knowledge.

Teachers' Role Change in the Classroom

The participants asserted that good teachers should change their classroom roles even if it is not accessible due to crowded classes. They should organize student-centered classes and avoid being the lone voice. Teachers should be able to run group discussions, encourage peer feedback, and help learners interact in the classroom. Teachers should foster collaborative learning and invite students to be active learners rather than recipients of knowledge. Learners should be encouraged to learn how to implement technology in their learning process. Teachers can use mobile phones and different Apps to teach English. Using such strategies, learners will become self-regulated, and learning will become personalized.

RQ2: What are the challenges of being a good teacher?

Parents' and Students' Negative Attitudes

In discussing the problems they encounter at work, teachers had several complaints that refrained them from being good teachers. The first problem was the parents' attitude, which sometimes was discouraging and frustrating. Problem students, which kept them from engaging the class in the learning process, was another issue mentioned by the interviewees. Besides, the students' negative attitudes toward language learning, mainly due to unsuccessful experiences at school, caused problems. Wrong decisions of inexperienced teachers in adopting techniques and strategies that led to students' exhaustion and developed a resiliency toward language learning was a common complaint of the respondents. School administrators' negligence toward English classes compared to other courses like physics, chemistry, and mathematics discouraged students. Their attitude implied that English is not as valuable as other lessons.

Extra Working Hours

The teachers asserted that they spent time at home and outside the classroom preparing materials, tests, and lesson plans. They thought those hours should be considered as part of their working hours. However, in reality, it was not so. Another problem that forced teachers to do their chores at home was the lack of facilities at schools. They believed that free access to the internet, academic websites, and local e-newsletters could save their time and energy and help them improve their teaching methods and techniques.

Other Problems

The interviewees also mentioned low-income, heterogeneous students and crowded classes that could lead to their burnout. Overcrowded classes and limited hours given to English in the weekly schedule paralyze teachers and impede the incorporation of group activities, classroom discussions, and teacher-student collaboration. The participants stated that students from diverse L2 learning backgrounds are a barrier to successful teaching. While some students have attended several English courses in private language institutes, some do not have an English background or know very little. Such students take grammar knowledge equally with knowing the language. Learners' primary goal is passing exams and getting good grades rather than learning English.

4. DISCUSSION

Teachers' characteristics are not easy to categorize. Several variables arising from the social environment may affect teachers. Personality factors, beliefs, thoughts, and attitudes also shape teachers' characteristics. This complexity is due to the nature of teaching as a complex endeavor. Commitment, mentioned by the respondents as the most crucial feature of a good teacher, is the desire to continue working. It is also related to teachers' engagement, motivation, self-efficacy, and well-being (Shu, 2022). Thus, policymakers should be aware that developing commitment and self-efficacy results in teachers' engagement in teaching.

Additionally, building a solid relationship between teachers and their career is the responsibility of educational systems. Appropriate working conditions are an influential factor in teachers' feelings of responsibility and commitment. Attention to working conditions by policymakers can develop teachers' sense of belonging to their profession. These findings align with Mokhtar et al. (2021), who investigated the relationship between job satisfaction, commitment, and self-efficacy of 984 primary school teachers. They found that teachers' commitment and job satisfaction were moderated by self-efficacy, and a positive relationship existed between self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Multiple studies also verify the same results (Blackburn et al., 2017; Chesnut & Cullen, 2014; Sukor & Hussin, 2019).

Another suggestion proposed by the interviewees was reflectivity in teaching. Reflective teaching postulates that teachers' teaching experience is crucial to their success. Reflective teachers observe their classroom activities, criticize themselves, and monitor their actions. Reflective teaching can promote teacher-student interactions (Zhu, 2013) and thus improve students' learning. Reflectivity may help teachers cope with the challenges they encounter in the workplace and society (Hillier, 2005). Several studies have indicated the importance of reflective teaching. For example, Dexter and Wall's (2021) survey of 46 elementary school teachers found that teachers' reflectivity was associated with higher levels of self-efficacy which can hinder the appearance of burnout. Rashtchi (2020) found a positive relationship between teachers' critical thinking and self-efficacy in another study. Rashtchi and Sanayi Mashhour (2019) also investigated the relationship between reflective teaching and burnout of 100 English teachers and found that the more teachers are reflective, the less burnout they experience.

Another characteristic highlighted by the respondents was teachers' leadership. Self-efficacious teachers can be good leaders. They are motivated enough to participate in extracurricular activities and encourage students to learn. Such teachers can activate their colleagues and thus enhance the teaching-learning process. Tyaningsih et al. (2021) found a positive direct effect of self-efficacy on teacher leadership. Additionally, Xie et al. (2022) studied 14121 Chinese middle school teachers and found that teachers' leadership positively affected their self-efficacy.

Another feature mentioned by the interviewees was the change in the role of teachers from the lone voice in the class to the facilitator changing English classes to student-centered ones. This change might seem easy at first sight; however, crowded classes and students' improper behavior during group activities may be challenging. As the teachers in this study argued, ongoing INSET classes can support teachers and help them adopt appropriate classroom strategies, including collaborative learning approaches (Dahri et al., 2021; Pozzi et al., 2023). INSET classes should aim at diverse areas in teaching methodology, focus on practical teaching and teachers' demos, and show classroom management videos. As Pozzi et al. (2023) argue, research findings regarding collaborative learning and what teachers practically implement in their classes do not conform. One reason could be that the classroom environment, in reality, has got several features that are overlooked when researchers incorporate strategies and techniques for research purposes.

A crucial issue in teacher education is teachers' technological literacy, which can facilitate their professional development, help them add variety to their classes, and use different teaching strategies. Teachers in this study asserted that technology is an inseparable part of their job nowadays and showed willingness to integrate various technological tools into their classes. Thus preparing teachers to "take advantage of the 21st century opportunities to succeed in the current reality of increased expectations and frequent reforms" seems necessary (Martinovic et al., 2019, p.32).

Teaching is not a static job; teachers follow developmental stages to promote their skills and abilities and learn how to enhance the quality of their instruction (Rashtchi & Khoshnevisan, 2019). Self-efficacious, reflective teachers can change their classes to student-centered environments, lead group discussions, foster student engagement and cultivate personalized learning. Besides, implementing strategies is more successful with self-efficacious teachers (Rashtchi & Jabalameli, 2012). Teachers should learn to think critically and solve problems.

Teacher trainers should provide appropriate tasks and activities to improve teachers' professional identity (Beijaard et al., 2000) and teaching qualities.

5. CONCLUSION

The current study focused on the characteristics of good teachers and the challenges teachers face at work. The findings from the focus group interviews clarified English teachers' perceptions of teaching and their challenges. The study showed that policymakers and teacher trainers should support teachers by focusing on their continuous training to help them gain professional identity. Schools should arrange workshops to keep language teachers lively. The study only focused on the opinions of five teachers, and it may not be generalizable to all situations. However, qualitative research aims to add to the general understanding of an issue and encourage researchers to pursue a line of thought until a theory is established. Future studies with teachers from different backgrounds and teaching experiences can help illuminate teachers' expectations, characteristics, and challenges.

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