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UFM Students' perception of the importance of English Teacher qualities in enhancing their English Competence

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Abstract

This mixed-method study sought to identify the qualities of English teachers that UFM students perceived to enhance their English learning. Interviews and surveys were used to collect qualitative and quantitative data from 152 UFM students of English Linguistics and other disciplines. Students reported 9 qualities perceived as significant factors that influenced their learning. Teacher's English competence, ability to apply EFL teaching principles, ability to exploit teaching materials effectively, professional attributes, and personal attributes are believed to be more important than the others. The study also found that teachers' knowledge of other English-speaking countries' culture and teaching methodology are vitally important to those who major in English Linguistics while students of other majors put teachers' understanding of other fields and their effective exploitation of teaching materials on the top priority.

Keywords: UFM students, English teacher qualities, English competence, perception

1. Introduction

Strengthening students' English competence has constantly been a concern among the educational leaders in Vietnam. The National Foreign Language Project 2020, which had aimed to ensure that students would be able to use English independently and confidently by 2020, however, proved to have gone nowhere after more than 10 years since it was first launched (Giáo dục 24h, 2018) [6].

At a scientific conference on the current state of English teaching in Ho Chi Minh City, many attendees contended that English education has not gained satisfactory results as a result of teachers' limited English competence and students' lack of motivation. As an English teacher of more-than-10-year experience, the researcher of this study has always contemplated how teachers should do to improve the quality of English teaching as well as raising students' enthusiasm for learning English.

For many years, teacher quality has been a focus of educational research since it has been shown to have a significant impact on students' learning outcomes and habits (Foster, Toma, & Troske, 2013; Ottmar, Rimm-Kaufman, Larsen, & Merritt, 2011; Provasnik & Young, 2003; Tran, 2013) [5].

Most previous studies have investigated the essential qualities required of teachers in both formal and informal educational institutions. Despite the practical implications those researches have brought to foreign language centers, schools and colleges to some extent, it is understandable that the studies had such a large scale, so there needs to be a smaller scale investigation as to the same matter so that teachers of each academic institution could have a clearer picture of what they are expected to do from students' points of view.

Like most universities in Ho Chi Minh city, UFM has constantly run timely course evaluations to identify the problems faced by students and collect their feedback on the courses. They use the feedback they obtain directly from students to make changes to the course in order to improve it. The course structure, professor feedback, course material feedback, teaching aids, and other features of the course are all included in course assessment questionnaires. Faculty members can improve their teaching skills based on this information, and the university's educational quality improves. Nevertheless, due to some personal problems, sometimes feedback from students are not reliable enough especially when some students do not dare to tell the truth about their teachers.

Therefore, this research offers a good opportunity for students to express their expectations of their ideal English teachers. In other words, the study aims to help UFM English teachers visualize what essential qualities they need to build to enhance students' English competence.

2. Literature review

2.1. Different views on qualified teachers.

In a separate study by Okpala and Ellis (2005)^[9], undergraduate students at a U.S. university were asked to fill out a questionnaire describing "excellent professors." According to the study's conclusions, a good teacher is one who is concerned about his students' learning processes.

Delaney *et al.* (2010)^[14] used an online open-ended questionnaire to study the perspectives of 330 students at Memorial University about effective teaching. Respectful, competent, personable, engaging, communicative, organized, responsive, professional, and amusing are among the nine fundamental traits identified by the study.

Many research on teacher attributes have been undertaken all over the world, with the majority of them focusing on student perceptions (Koutsoulis, 2003; S. Thompson, 2008)^[7]. Male and female participants, as well as those with varying academic levels, had diverse viewpoints on teacher qualities, according to the studies. Despite this, there was agreement among the research findings.

- Expert knowledge of the subject
- Pedagogical skills
- Classroom management skills
- Professional attitude and behavior
- Personal characteristics

Although the aforementioned teacher traits can be applicable to English teachers, there are notable differences between teaching English and teaching other topics. Borg (2006) interviewed 200 English and other subject teachers in order to discover what makes English teachers unique. In terms of the nature of English as a subject, the content of teaching, the teaching methodology, teacher-learner relationships, the contrast between native and non-native speakers, and other aspects, the findings suggested that English teachers were distinct from their colleagues in other subjects. Similarly, Lee (2010) discovered that English teachers differed in four ways: the subject matter's complexity, teaching content, teaching technique, and teacher personality. As a result, quality criteria for English teachers may differ from those for teachers of other subjects.

The National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) have established a number of quality requirements for English teachers, as follows (Tellez & Waxman, 2005)^[12]:

- Language: Teachers must have a thorough understanding of English as a whole, as well as each of its components.
- Culture: Teachers must be aware of how culture affects children's linguistic development and learning outcomes. They must also be familiar with crucial aspects of the culture in which their students are from, as well as how that culture may influence language acquisition.
- Teachers must successfully apply pedagogical skills to teach English with standards and effectively use resources when planning, implementing, and administering teaching.
- Assessment: Teachers must be capable of evaluating

their students' development using appropriate assessment activities and procedures. They must also be aware that evaluation biases may have an impact on students' learning.

- Professionalism: To advance in their field, teachers must study and investigate for themselves. When it is suitable, they should also work together with coworkers.

A set of quality criteria for English teachers was also produced by the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS) (Tellez & Waxman, 2005)^[12]. Although the standards looked similar to those of TESOL and NCATE, THE NBPTS appears to place a greater emphasis on the importance of expert knowledge in English language teaching:

- Knowledge of students: Teachers must recognize that their students' knowledge, skills, interests, aspirations, and values are influenced by their growth, language, and culture.
- Knowledge of language and language development: Teachers must be fluent in English and grasp the process by which a language, whether native or second, is learned.
- Knowledge of culture and diversity: Teachers must be able to use culture to aid students' learning in order for them to obtain better results.
- Subject-matter expertise: Teachers should have a broad understanding of a variety of disciplines, as well as how to help students learn.

Despite the fact that the standards were developed for various objectives, they represented the most important sets of attributes that English teachers should possess. These standards came together in the following areas:

- Knowledge of English
- Knowledge of the subject matter
- Knowledge of the influence of culture on students' linguistic development
- Knowledge of students and students' needs
- Teaching competences
- Skills in using assessment
- Professional attributes
- Personal attributes

2.2. Students' perceptions of English teacher qualities across the world

Brosh (1996)^[2] investigated the perspectives of foreign language teachers and students in Israel in order to find desirable features in foreign language teachers. The end result revealed the following desirable characteristics: (1) solid command of the target language, (2) ability to notice, explain, clarify, excite, and prolong students' attention and motivation, (3) no partiality or prejudice toward any specific student in the class, and (4) availability to students

Park and Lee (2006)^[10] conducted a self-report questionnaire with three categories: English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge and socio-affective skills, to 339 students in a high school to investigate most-seeking English teacher qualities. Like Brosh's findings, Park and Lee recognized that English proficiency and pedagogical knowledge were considered the most important qualities.

After four years, Barnes and Lock (2010)^[11] investigated students' perceptions of the attributes that make effective English teachers in Korea by asking 105 first-year university

students of EFL classes at a women's university to write the factors of effective EFL teachers in their mother tongue. The results of the study were described in five categories: rapport, lesson delivery, fairness, knowledge and credibility, and organization and preparation. Remarkably, students believed rapport and delivery as the most important characteristics of an EFL teacher.

A Taiwanese study by Chen and Lin (2009)^[3] examined Chinese students' perceptions of effective EFL teachers with a 50-item questionnaire sent to 190 students, and the results were reported that the instructional competence, personality, and teacher-student relationship were most desired attributes of an effective EFL teacher. Among these qualities, however, instructional competence was considered less important than personality and teacher-student relationship.

A Thai study by Wichadee (2010)^[14], who designed a questionnaire on the characteristics of effective English teachers to send to 400 students in Bangkok University, was reported that effective English teachers are those who are well-organized and have good communication skills.

Most recently, Ramazani (2014)^[11] used a self-report questionnaire to investigate 384 university students' beliefs about the characteristics of effective English teachers in Iran. The results showed that students valued teachers' pedagogical knowledge as much as their socio-effective skill. From all the studies above, it can be found that English teachers' qualities expected from students can be summarized as the following: English competence, teaching methodology, and personal attributes.

3. Research Design and Methodology

This study sought to find out the most desirable qualities of English teachers UFM students perceived to enhance their learning. The research question was: What qualities of English teachers do UFM students perceive to enhance their English competence? A mixed-method approach (Hesse-Biber, 2010) was employed to find answers to the research question. That means both qualitative and quantitative data were collected to serve the purpose of the study. The study was conducted at UFM, where the researcher works as an English teacher.

3.1. Qualitative stage

Instead of conducting the interview orally with students, the researchers wanted to make sure that the students could be at ease answering the questions, so he delivered the interview questions and asked students to record their answers and sent back via email. Seven UFM students were involved in this 'interview' and the participants ranged from first-year students to third-year students. A minority of students are English majors while the rest are non-English majors. With the 'interview', the participants were asked to discuss the question: 'What are the qualities of English teacher you think could enhance your English competence?' All of the responses were collected and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts were analyzed using content analysis approach (Krippendorff, 2013) to identify English teacher qualities that students believed to enhance their study.

3.2. Quantitative stage

Apart from the interviews, the researcher also conducted a survey which included the 11 English teacher qualities. It was delivered to 152 UFM students. Among the participants, just over a quarter of them were majors of English Linguistics,

and the rest are students of other disciplines. Only 6.6% were seniors, more than 25% sophomores, 22.4% freshmen and 44.1% juniors. In the survey, students were requested to rate the importance of each teacher qualities which were perceived to boost their English learning on a 5-point Likert scale in which 1 denoted 'very important' and 5 'very important'.

4. Results

Qualitative results

Qualitative data showed that UFM students need many different qualities from their teachers; however, these qualities can be categorized into 9 sets as follows:

4.1. English competence

Almost all the students agreed that English competence is the most vital quality expected of their English teachers. They contended that English teachers are supposed to '*use English correctly and suitably in different contexts*' (**Student 1**) and '*must have good English competence at all costs, particularly in Reading, Listening, Writing and Speaking*' (**Student 7**). Besides, they emphasized the importance of teachers' pronunciation and intonation that '*teachers do not necessarily to speak like a native speaker, but must have a standard pronunciation*' (**Student 3**). *This view was also reasoned that one minor mistake of a teacher could be passed on from generation to generation* (**Student 7**). They believed that these mistakes would be very hard to be corrected in their later years of learning process. They also recalled a situation in which their classmates made pronunciation mistakes even in Vietnamese, but refused to accept the correction from someone else just because these students believed their teachers were never wrong.

4.2. Knowledge of cultures of English-speaking countries

Some participants who are majors of English Linguistics asserted that they would prefer to work with a teacher who have experienced of living and studying in an English-speaking country because they '*felt more motivated to learn English with real-life stories from their teachers*' (**Student 1**). They also believed that understanding '*Western cultures should be a plus for English teachers*' (**Student 3**) because they would be able to make their lessons more interesting. Moreover, the knowledge of understanding cultures of English-speaking countries could be called a '*competitive advantage for English teachers and should be a must for them*' (**Student 5**) because language development is always connected with cultures. Therefore, being able to exposed to the cultural features of these countries would enable teachers to use English more precisely and suitably in various contexts. In addition, they believed it would be extremely interesting when a Vietnamese teacher could put on gestures or behaviors typical of Westerners in appropriate situations.

4.3. Ability to apply EFL teaching principles

Many students asserted that teachers' application of teaching principles into lessons is of importance in facilitating students' learning. Teacher's capacity is shown in the way they '*diversify teaching methods to enable students to grasp the knowledge with ease*' (**Student 2**). This view is shared with the point from another student who believed that '*a qualified English teacher should find out modern teaching methods which can encourage students to study without getting bored or distressed*'. (**Student 4**). This requires

teacher's creativity to integrate games or amusing activities into the lessons to seek more excitement from students. Furthermore, an English teacher with good teaching methodology also means that '*they have the ability to convey the knowledge and inspire others, thereby getting rid of the fear of studying English*' and they should also '*have the ability to make a connection between learning English and other social knowledge as well*' (**Student 4**). In other words, teachers should '*integrate practical knowledge into lessons so that they can captivate students*' (**Student 5**). Participants also admitted that there are, in reality, a lot of complicated subjects but '*teachers have succeeded in modifying them to make it more intriguing and one of participants admitted that she was able to overcome difficulties in her study and figure out how to improve language skills thanks to devoted and enthusiastic teachers she has studied with so far*' (**Student 5**).

4.4. Ability to meet students' learning needs

This quality appeared relevant to some of the interviewed students. They explained that they would be '*more pleased to have English teachers who was able to address or concern about their learning needs*' (**student 1**). On top of that, some believed that teachers should teach in a way that '*serve various learning needs*' because '*each student has a different learning style*' (**student 3**) and a good teacher is the one who can '*give lessons in different ways*' (**student 3**). Another participant also shared a viewpoint on this matter that '*English for workers must be taught differently from English for students and home tutoring must be different from formal classes*' (**Student 7**).

4.5. Ability to exploit teaching materials effectively

This quality was also one of the big concerns to students. They stated that they '*felt bored with teachers who relied only on the main coursebook for the lessons*' (**Student 2**). One of the participants said that teachers should recommended interesting materials related to the topic of the lessons to students so that they would '*read more to support them in grasping the knowledge*' (**Student 5**). Teachers should also supplement the main coursebook with other materials during the course so that students can enhance their skills in the subject. Also, '*students wanted to have discussions with teachers on issues beyond the coursebook which they believed would give them the most updated knowledge and practical skills*' (**student 7**)

4.6. Ability to manage a class effectively

Some students admitted that they lack confidence in speaking skill and hoped that English teachers would pay more attention to them. They would be '*demotivated to be in class where excellent students keep dominating in the class and contributing all the answers to teachers*' (**Student 5**). Other participants also agreed that teachers should '*simplify the questions so that less able students would feel more involved in the lessons*' (**Student 6**). In addition, a qualified English teacher should be '*skillful in organizing groupwork/pair work effectively so that all the students were able to participate in the class activities*' (**Student 4**)

4.7. Ability to apply information technologies into teaching

Most participants shared the same viewpoint that applying the knowledge of information technologies into teaching is

vitality important. However, each participant's response was underpinned by separate reasons. First of all, one participant considered that '*this ability allowed teachers to design interesting lessons*' (**Student 1**). For example, a PowerPoint lesson would be obviously more compelling than '*a blackboard lesson*'. Furthermore, with the knowledge of IT, '*teachers would create another interactive environment that runs parallel to the physical classroom, for example, Facebook groups, Google classrooms, MS Teams and so on*' (**Student 5**). These social platforms offer students a golden opportunity to use English on a daily basis, and teachers can encourage their students to interact more with their peers in this way. Last but not least, a good command of IT is a great help to teachers during the outbreak of the pandemic. One of the participants contended that they would '*feel frustrated with low-tech teachers who failed to conduct a class meeting online effectively*' (**Student 7**).

4.8. Professional attributes

Some participants also mentioned numerous behaviors as the vital qualities expected in their English teachers. For example, they would prefer to study with a teacher who '*takes punctuality seriously*' (**student 1**), '*always prepares well for the lessons and announces their absence beforehand*' (**Student 2**), '*follows the dress code of the workplace and behaves appropriately in accordance with the standards of teaching profession*' (**Student 5**). Some argued that '*lack of these qualities could demotivate students in learning*'. (**Student 3 and Student 7**).

4.9. Personal characteristics

Participants of this study listed a number of personal characteristics of an English teacher that are most expected and believed to be able to support their learning. '*A good sense of humor and a professional style can motivate students to study better*' (**Student 1**). This idea is quite similar to the view of another student who considered being enthusiastic, friendly, sympathetic and humorous is always necessary to become a good English teacher. This enables students to feel relaxed while attending a class, thereby acquiring the knowledge with ease. Besides, teachers should '*possess a knack of communication which allows them to deal with questions from students swimmingly*' (**Student 6**) and they need to '*have an enquiring mind which would be good for their professional development*' (**Student 2**). Another characteristic of importance would be being patient and devoted. That means teachers should '*have a great love for their job and show complete commitment to work*' (**Student 6**). For example, they would be willing to stay for a while to give explanation to students or provide them some useful tips of learning at the end of the class because English is quite challenging to many students and this participant also admitted being weak at Listening and Speaking skills despite having been studying English for many years. So, she believed that kind of quality from English teachers would really help students like her. Teachers' patience is also shown in the way they pay close attention to less able students and correct their mistakes because '*Some students are afraid of being laughed at when they mispronounce a certain word*' (**Student 3**). One of the participants emphasized '*the ability to inspire students as the remarkable characteristic that English teachers should have in addition to being friendly and approachable*' (**Student 4**).

Quantitative results

Table 1: UFM students' perceptions of the importance of English teacher qualities for enhancing their English learning

English teacher qualities	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Teachers' English competence	0%	0.7%	0.7%	22.9%	75.8%
Knowledge of other fields	0%	1.3%	36.6%	52.9%	9.2%
Knowledge of English-speaking countries' culture	0%	0%	17.6%	56.2%	26.1
Ability to apply EFL teaching principles	0%	0%	1.3%	41.8%	56.9%
Ability to meet students' learning needs	0%	0%	7.8%	55.6%	36.6%
Ability to exploit teaching materials effectively	0%	0%	6.5%	41.8%	51.6%
Ability to manage a class effectively	0%	1.3%	25.5%	53.6%	19.6%
Ability to use effective assessment	0%	0.7%	24.2%	49.7%	25.5%
Ability to apply information technologies into teaching	0%	0.7%	20.3%	49.7%	29.4%
Professional attributes	0%	0%	9.2%	41.8%	49%
Personal attributes	0%	0%	5.2%	38.6%	56.2%

The percentages in Table 1 shows that all the teacher qualities are perceived to enhance students' learning process. In particular, teachers' competence, ability to apply EFL teaching principles, ability to exploit teaching materials effectively, professional attributes, and personal attributes are considered 'very important' qualities for an English teacher while knowledge of other fields, knowledge of English-speaking countries' culture, ability to meet students' learning needs, ability to manage a class effectively, ability to use effective assessment, ability to apply information

technologies into teaching are believed to be 'important' qualities. Remarkably, Teachers' English competence was concerned the most with more than 75% of participants responded that it plays a very important role in enhancing students' English level.

In addition, Pivot Table was used to investigate the difference in UFM students' perceptions of English teacher qualities based on their majors. In this study, the students' majors were labeled 'English linguistics' or 'Others', and these are the result from running Pivot Table.

Table 2: Difference in UFM students' perceptions of teachers' English competence

Majors	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Others	0 %	0 %	1 %	26 %	73 %
English Linguistics	0 %	3 %	0 %	13 %	84 %

Table 3: Difference in UFM students' perceptions of teachers' knowledge of other fields

Majors	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Others	0 %	0 %	1 %	26 %	73 %
English Linguistics	0 %	3 %	26 %	59 %	12 %

Table 4: Difference in UFM students' perceptions of teachers' knowledge of English-speaking countries' culture

Majors	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Others	0 %	0 %	20 %	55 %	25 %
English Linguistics	0 %	0 %	10 %	59 %	31 %

Table 5: Difference in UFM students' perceptions of teachers' ability to apply EFL teaching principles

Majors	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Others	0 %	0 %	8 %	53 %	39 %
English Linguistics	0 %	0 %	8 %	64 %	28 %

Table 6: Difference in UFM students' perceptions of teachers' ability to meet students' learning needs

Majors	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Others	0 %	0 %	4 %	45 %	51 %
English Linguistics	0 %	0 %	15 %	33 %	52 %

Table 7: Difference in UFM students' perceptions of teachers' ability to manage a class effectively

Majors	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Others	0 %	1 %	26 %	52 %	21 %
English Linguistics	0 %	3 %	23 %	59 %	15 %

Table 8: Difference in UFM students' perceptions of teachers' ability to manage a class effectively

Majors	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Others	0 %	1 %	24 %	49 %	26 %
English Linguistics	0 %	0 %	26 %	51 %	23 %

Table 9: Difference in UFM students' perceptions of teachers' ability to use effective assessment

Majors	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Others	0 %	1 %	21 %	47 %	31 %
English Linguistics	0 %	0 %	18 %	56 %	26 %

Table 10: Difference in UFM students' perceptions of teachers' ability to apply information technologies into teaching

Majors	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Others	0 %	1 %	21 %	47 %	31 %
English Linguistics	0 %	0 %	18 %	56 %	26 %

Table 11: Difference in UFM students' perceptions of teachers' professional attributes

Majors	Very unimportant	Unimportant	Neutral	Important	Very important
Others	0 %	0 %	11 %	46 %	43 %
English Linguistics	0 %	0 %	3 %	31 %	66 %

From the tables above, it can be found that there seems to be no significant gap between UFM students' perceptions of most English teacher qualities when students are divided into two groups of majors (English Linguistics and Others). However, in terms of four English teacher qualities (teachers' knowledge of other fields, teachers' knowledge of English-speaking countries' culture, teachers' ability to apply EFL teaching principles, teachers' ability to exploit teaching materials effectively), there was quite remarkable difference in the perceptions of UFM students who belong to the two different majors. In particular, a greater proportion of English majors rated teachers' knowledge of English-speaking countries' culture and ability to apply EFL teaching principles 'important' or 'very important' than those who major in other subjects (90% and 80% respectively). Meanwhile, it is noticeable that students who have other disciplines considered teachers' knowledge of other fields and ability to exploit English teaching materials weightier than those of English Linguistics. Almost 100% of students of other majors put these two qualities the top priority while only just over 70% of English majors shared the same viewpoint.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study shows that among the nine categories of English teacher qualities, UFM students rated teacher's English competence, ability to apply EFL teaching principles, ability to exploit teaching materials effectively, professional attributes, and personal attributes are considered more important than the others. Those findings are consistent with the previous studies which were conducted in other countries, shown in the Literature Review.

It has come to our knowledge that like most students in other institutions, UFM students concern a lot about English teacher's competence. This helps to remind English teachers that they must have adequate commitment to improving their English skills, teaching methodology as well as building professional attributes and positive personality traits, which is the key to their professional development.

The findings of this research found out the differences between students of English Linguistics and other majors in their perception of the importance of English teachers' qualities. It is very likely that this information can be used as reference for the faculty when it comes to giving teaching assignments to teachers. If it is the case as what is shown in the results, students of English Linguistics would be more pleased with a teacher who is an expert in the culture of English-speaking countries in addition to their effective

application of teaching principles. On the other hand, students who major in other disciplines would be probably satisfied with an English teacher who is knowledgeable in other fields and excels in exploiting teaching materials for their students.

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