

Students' Perceptions of Teachers' Roles

B.A. Cliserio Cruz

Universidad Veracruzana

School of Languages

Abstract

I am concerned about my teaching practice and that is why I hereby investigate and report my Students' perceptions of teachers' roles. This is to have a wide overview of what students think about English teachers' roles, teaching, and learning. The study aims at identifying to what extent the roles of the teacher may influence on students' performances and act upon into what is happening inside the classroom. Furthermore, it is important to shed light on how such roles get into the curriculum design. I believe that by doing research on this topic I can better understand students' needs and points of view; that way, I will be able to improve myself as a professional and report relevant data for other researchers interested in the topic. Investigating what characteristics are considered good according to my students and how they perceive English teachers' roles may be beneficial not only to me, but to English as a foreign language teachers in terms of understanding what their students expect from them; hence, the importance of shedding light on what students have to say and make the suitable changes to our teaching practices regarding their voices.

Introduction

Although this study started as a final essay for a learning experience of my master's studies, I plan to keep on investigating and make it bigger in order to be consistent with the goals of the project. The points to ponder in this study regarding the teachers' roles are what the students expected from the teacher regarding his roles and what the teacher actually carries out in his practice. In what follows, the development of this paper: the context of the study, literature review, research methodology, findings, discussion, conclusions.

1. The context

The setting is the "Educación Continua" Department, School of Languages, at the University of Veracruz. This Department is a program that the University of Veracruz applies to teach English, among other subjects, to children and adolescents; that way, the school contributes to forming people to be productive for the society. The participants were enrolled in the first period of the curriculum at "Educación Continua" and most of them were having their first contact with the English language.

2. The importance of being an effective language teacher

As the main objective in this study is to identify students' expectations of teachers' roles, I will provide some experts words on effective language teachers. There are specific roles teachers are supposed to play and the ones they actually do. The teachers' roles in society are expected to be a proper or customary function. Students may perceive English teachers as people who should have the knowledge of the subject matter in the classroom at their fingers tips. However, as Nunan (in Bailey, et al., 2001) comments, English teachers are employed just because they speak the language fluently, not because they have a formal training as teachers. But if teaching is to foster understanding in students, it has to involve two types of knowledge: knowledge of the matter and pedagogical knowledge (Wilson, 1987). The foster refers to the knowledge of the language while the latter involves the knowledge of principles of language teaching and learning, learners, curriculum, context, and techniques of classroom behaviour and management.

Nevertheless, to go in depth and ponder points regarding language teachers' roles and the pedagogical knowledge, Delaney reports in a study of high school that students' top five characteristics of a good teacher are:

- knowledgeable;
- humorous;
- respectful;
- patient; and
- organised.

Regarding those characteristics, the study states that students learn from what they [teachers] do, and the knowledge, skills and attitudes they exhibit (Harden & Crosby, 2000:1).

3. The study

The methodological design of this study is based on a qualitative-quantitative approach; that is, it is a mixed study (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2009; Plano and Creswell, 2008; Bergman, 2008; and Hernández Sampieri and Mendoza, 2008). One of the more meaningful definitions of the mixed approach is the following given by Hernández Sampieri and Mendoza (2008): the mixed research method represents an amount of systematic, empiric, and critical research processes, and imply the collecting and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data, to interpret the whole data collected (meta-interferences); and as a consequence, to get a better understanding of the phenomenon under study. It is stated that in the mixed method there is a combination of at least one quantitative component and a qualitative one in just one study or research project.

3.1 Participants

The present study was undertaken in order to explore the perceptions of sixteen Elementary English students of my roles as a teacher. There were eleven female and five male students. There was a variety of ages in this sample, since they have different academic backgrounds. Some of them are at elementary school and some others are in high school. Their age ranged from 10 to 13 years old. I had planned to interview all students who answered the survey; however, time constrains did not allow me to do so; nevertheless, I managed to

interview five students and a colleague observed 2 sessions of my teaching, 1 hour long each observation.

3.2 Data collection instruments

I collected data by means of three instruments: a survey, semi-structured interviews, and observations. The survey was employed as primary data from which I took the emerging topics and categories to classify it. I employed semi-structured interviews because they are “more flexibly worded, a mix of more or less structured questions” (Merriam, 1998: 71), not asked in a specific order, but as the conversation unfolds. Finally, I used observations to complement my study and go in depth in to students’ reactions towards the roles I played in the classroom.

3.3 Procedures

First of all, I modified the survey in such a way there were suitable questions for collecting useful data for this study. Then, I applied the survey to five students to test its suitability. After that, I applied it in the Elementary English course I am teaching at the moment. I asked students to be cooperative and coherent when answering, so that I could get reliable data for my research purpose. They answered it in about 10 or 15 minutes. In addition to the survey, a college student interviewed five students to go into the issues emerging in the data. She did the interviews in a manner that my interviewees could feel comfortable, in a familiar environment. She recorded the interviews and then I did the transcriptions. As a matter of fact, when analysing the transcript there was data that was not clear enough. For that reason, I went back to the interviewee and I asked him to read the transcript with me. Furthermore, it was useful since the interview became richer, this means that more data came up after discussion. Arksey and Knight (1999), comment that interviews are likely to enrich research. Interviewing was therefore relevant for carrying out this research as it provided me with an exploration of the participants’ experiences in depth; that is, their perspectives on teachers’ roles.

4. Findings

The following characteristics of effective teachers were reported by students when they were asked to answer a survey in which they had to rank from the most to the least important characteristic. The results made me categorise and interpret those characteristics into roles teachers play or are supposed to play.

- Knowledgeable = **Provider of knowledge**
- Patient = **Counselor**
- Friendly = **Manager**
- Respectful = **Model**
- Dynamic = **Organiser**

I focus on three roles for the sake of space in this paper: provider of knowledge, model, and counselor roles.

4.1 Provider of knowledge

As mentioned before, Delaney top five characteristics of effective teachers in his study. It is interesting to see that after applying the survey I found out similar data. I first category I identified according to my participants was that teachers have to be *knowledgeable*. Therefore I took this characteristic and I interpreted that it is related to a role many teachers play in the classroom: ‘provider of knowledge’. I quote some of my students’ responses in order to justify this role:

1. *Because that way students can learn the language from the teacher's skills.*
2. *Because he need know for show to students.*
3. *Que sepa mucho y pueda aclararnos las dudas.*
4. *Es muy importante saber de lo que se hable.*

“[A teacher has to] combine techniques in class, as well as sufficient command of the basic structure of human existence, with a view to assessing any situation accurately and

appropriately” (Thanasoulas, 1999:49). As mentioned before, learners learn from what teachers do, and the knowledge, skills and attitudes they exhibit (Harden & Crosby, 2000:1). This role is very often played whether the curriculum is centred on the learner or not. In the study *Students’ perceptions of English teachers* (Cruz, 2011) I identified and reported that teachers are still seen as providers of knowledge rather than facilitators of it as a matter of fact. This may have an impact in the educational paradigm as well as in the curriculum design. The role of the teacher in this sense becomes a complex one. The educational model makes impact in the way a curriculum is designed and also in the approach teachers employ in their classrooms. It seems that every aspect have to be coordinated. If we are to follow an approach in the micro space (inside the classroom), we also should do it in the macro space (model, curriculum, policies). The role of the teacher here should be the facilitator one rather than the provider of knowledge. That is, to be coherent with the educational model which looks for students’ autonomy, as well as the curriculum designs that provides learning experiences instead of subjects. The teachers’ knowledge is relevant since it will afford them with more tools to make effective decisions in the classroom, but we have to take into consideration the context we are in order to perform our roles effectively. In my opinion, it is paramount to foster students’ autonomous learning. It is interesting and fundamental to know that students see their teachers as providers of knowledge, indeed. Although teachers should play the role of facilitators rather than tyranny teachers who are providers of knowledge, they seem not to do it. There might be some repercussions because of this; which could be dropping out, lack of motivation, or misbehaviour.

4.2 Model

Students often perceive English teachers as models. I sometimes play the role of a model. I teach students who are 11. These young learners are more likely to be influenced by the people around them. They decide whether they follow patterns or not. I think school might be sometimes an extension of the family nucleus. This could be a touchy topic because we teachers have a lot of responsibility and it is sometimes overwhelming. It is paramount to understand why learners sometimes behave one way or another and regard that they may tend to imitate their teachers as we can see in the following quotations:

- 1. The teacher must show respect to foster this value.*
- 2. Para que el alumno no le falte el respeto al maestro o al revés.*
- 3. Tener respeto a los alumnos para poner ejemplo y recibir respeto a cambio.*
- 4. Ser trabajador para que los alumnos se lleven un ejemplo y no sean flojos.*

Being aware that we may be a model to follow is important for us teachers since we have to perform in suitable ways in front of my students. In order to become a successful communicator and model for learners, the teacher should promote a wide range of behaviours and psychological and social relationships such as solidarity and politeness, (Thanasoulas, 1999). Therefore teachers have to exemplify what should be learned (Harden & Crosby, 2000:1).

4.3 Counselor

It is amazing how much a teacher can influence in students motivation to learn. For instance, being punctual, responsible, committed, respectful, etc. I am comfortable trying to foster students' reflection on why they are studying another language, then they come up with their motivations to learn whether intrinsic or extrinsic ones. Considering the role of motivator, I need to put into practice my skills on interpersonal relationships and transmit the devotion I have for my profession. Sometimes, it is hard to motivate students; moreover, when they do not want to study my subject. What makes me feel more satisfied is that there is always a possibility to let students see in which way English can be useful in their lives, although they do not see any point in studying it. The following words are students' statements about their self confidence in the classroom and how that is influenced by the teacher's roles:

- 1. Porque así siento más confianza para preguntar alguna duda.*
- 2. Porque si un maestro no es paciente el alumno no podría aprender nada.*

3. Porque hay situaciones ajenas al alumno y no hay tolerancia por parte del maestro.

4. El maestro debe entender al alumno.

A teacher must be sensitive to the various personal and cultural differences of their students (Young, 2006:2); to provide enough *remedial work*, in order to eradicate students' errors, and encourage learners to develop their own learning strategies and techniques, so as to discover the answers to their own questions, (Thanasoulas, 1999). Motivations and the teacher as a motivator is a role that emerged from students' perceptions and it is really important to keep an eye on it.

5. Discussion

After analysing the results, three main characteristics-roles are to be discussed. It is evident those roles have to meet students' expectations in order to achieve effective teaching and learning. Furthermore, it is vital to be aware of what students think and need; and that is why I really believe this research may be more reliable and complete if it goes in depth into many other factors that influence students' opinions on teachers' roles. Learning styles may be one path to follow to discover what happens in our classrooms.

6. Conclusion

Regarding all this emerging data it is paramount for us teachers to match students' expectations, perceptions, and needs with teachers' actions. It is time now to act upon this knowledge; that is, to play those roles in such a way they go with students' needs and evaluate the results. If teachers involved in the language learning process fail to perform their role successfully due to the lack of knowledge, then there will be consequences that can negatively affect students' learning experiences and their expectations will not be matched. For the sake of learners' development, it is paramount for us teachers to be aware of the roles we play in our teaching practice so that we can favour learners' training. One of the main issues that surround my teaching practice is the role of the teacher and how students perceive those roles inside the classroom. Nevertheless, identifying the roles I am expected to play in the classroom, it is being a turning point in my performance as a professional since I am committed to become an effective teacher.

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Appendix

General characteristics chart

Characteristic	Why is this characteristic important?
5. Knowledgeable	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To learn the language form the teacher's skills • To know students' needs • To solve doubts and problems • To explain properly
4. Patient	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To explain several times the same topic • For students to feel confident when asking questions
3. Friendly	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To create a good classroom environment
2. Respectful	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher has to foster this value for students to follow it • To create a good atmosphere
1. Dynamic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To use different techniques and activities

- From 5 to 1, the most important to the less one according to students.