

**Important Characteristics of Competent English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Teacher:
Students' Perceptions in Indonesian Context**

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This study was aimed to investigate students' perceptions of important characteristics of a competent EFL teacher. The study employed a mixed methods case study research design. The data were obtained from questionnaire and focus group interview. The participants of the study were 318 eighth grader students from 2 junior high schools located in 2 regions in West Java Province, Indonesia. A number of 997 and 176 important characteristics of a competent EFL teacher emerged obtained from open-ended questionnaire and focus group interview. They were categorized into four effective teaching behaviors in terms of approachability, subject matter mastery, teaching clarity and instructional delivery. The major finding of the study reveals that a competent English teacher is the one who is approachable, presents clear teaching, delivers the lessons using a variety of teaching resources including technology, and has the mastery of the subject matter.

Key words: approachability, subject matter mastery, teaching clarity, instructional delivery

1. Introduction

Efforts on the improvement of education quality have always been one of the important concerns of governments in all regions of the worlds (Suherdi, 2012, p. 54; UNESCO, 2013, p. 21; World Bank, 2012, p. 3). The improvement of quality of education relies heavily on the quality and competency of a teacher (Bourgonje & Tromp, 2011; Milanowsky, et al, 2009). Therefore, plans for improving the quality of education should focus on the improvement of quality of teaching (Suryahadi & Sambodho, 2013, p. 11) and the development of teachers' competence (Creemers, 1994, pp. 10-11).

From time to time, research has shown that teachers are the most significant influence on student achievement (e.g. Anderson, 2004; Kane, Rockoff, & Staiger, 2006; Nye, Konstantopolous,

& Hedges, 2004). Teachers also become the most significant resources in schools to improve student learning (Cooper, 2006, p. 9; Hightower, et al, 2011; Mendro, et al, 1998; OECD, 2009, p. 3).

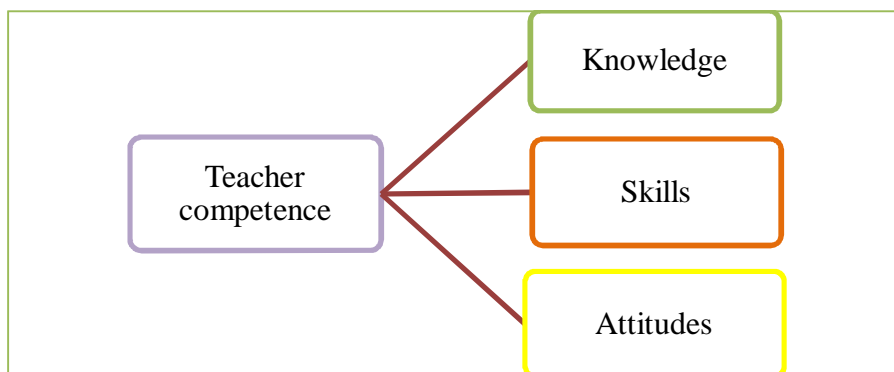
2. Literature Review

2.1 Teacher Competence

Teacher competence is defined as a description of skills, knowledge, and attitudes required by teachers to perform effective teaching (Borich, 1977; Hagen and Skule, 2004; Medley, 1982).

Knowledge, skills, and attitudes become the three essential components of teacher competence. The three essential components of teacher competence are illustrated in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Essential components of teacher competence



Of the importance of teacher competence, research consistently shows that teacher competence is professed:

- to improve the quality of teaching (Soepriyatna, 2012);
- to improve teacher performance (Armstrong and Baron, 1995; Brophy and Kelly, 2002; Dubois, 1998; Mulder, 2001);
- to play an important role and guide the success of students learning (Soepriyatna, 2012);
- to enhance learner's achievement (Wright, Horns and Sanders, 1997).

2.2 Characteristics of Competent Teachers

Literature has consistently showed that competent teachers are those who possess the following characteristics:

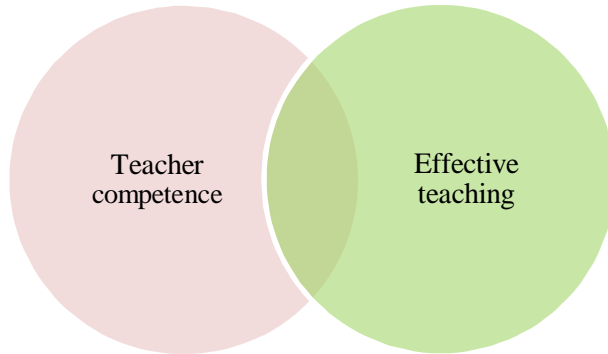
- know their subject matter (e.g. Bain, 2004; Sadker and Sadker, 1997; Shulman, 1986);
- present clear lesson (e.g. Rosenshine & Furst, 1971);
- engage students in learning (e.g. James and Pollard, 2006)
- provide feedback to students (e.g. Rosenshine & Stevens, 1986; Westwood, 2008);
- hold high expectations to their students (e.g. Hay McBer, 2000);

- are enthusiastic about students and their learning (e.g. Marsh, 1984);
- care about students as individuals and made them feel valued (Stronge and Xu, 2012);
- treat students respectfully, equally and fairly (e.g. Brosh, 1996; Clark, 1995; MacBeath et al, 1999);
- deliver lessons using a variety of instructional strategies and technologies (e.g. Marzano, 2003; Stronge, 2012);
- monitor students learning (e.g. Rosenshine, 2010).

The literature reviewed also indicates that the term of teacher competence is always associated with the characteristics of effective teaching.

The relationship between teacher competence and effective teaching is outlined in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. **Relationship between teacher competence and effective teaching**



The Figure shows that teacher competence and effective teaching are interrelated. To perform effective teaching, teacher needs to possess knowledge, skills, and attitudes as the essential components of teacher competence. therefore, teacher competence serves as the basis for effective teaching.

2.3 Effective Teaching Behavior Category: Approachability, subject matter mastery, teaching clarity and instructional delivery

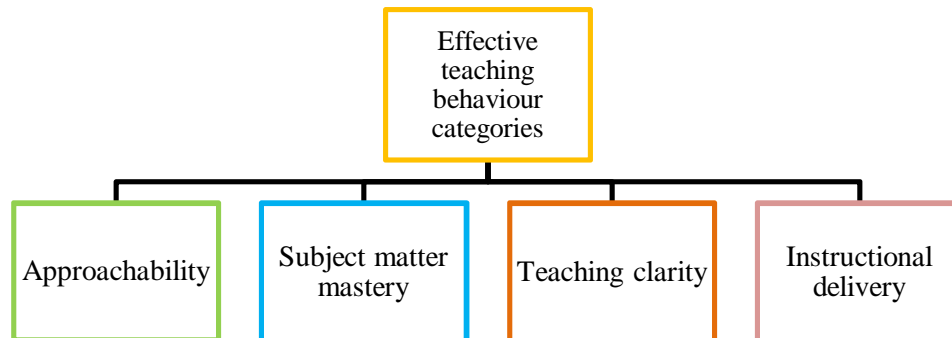
Teaching is a demanding profession (Stronge, et al., 2004, p. 34). The research findings show that to be effective, a teacher must possess several knowledge and skills on how to deliver the classroom teaching effectively (Stronge, 2004). Thus, the literature abounds with articles and lists that characterize effective teaching behaviors, attitudes, and practices (Brophy, 1979).

In one of the most comprehensive reviews of studies on teaching behaviors and student achievement, Rosenshine and Furst (1973) proposed nine teaching characteristics to improve student learning. The three characteristics which are relevant to the study are (1) clarity; (2) variability in teaching methods and materials; and (3) enthusiasm.

Based on the literature reviewed on effective teaching, this study categorized effective teaching behavior into four categories: approachability, subject matter mastery, teaching clarity and instructional delivery.

The four effective teaching behavior categories are outlined in Figure 3 below.

Figure 3. **Effective teaching behavior categories**



The Figure shows the four effective teaching behavior category used in the study. The four effective teaching behavior categories will be discussed in the following sections.

2.3.1 Approachability

The term approachability tends to appear as a result in much research on students' perceptions of good/effective teacher (e.g. Moyle's, 1995). Teacher approachability was developed based on the concepts that a teacher should be approachable for the students (e.g. Chan, 1994; Fraser, n.d).

Fraser (n.d) proposes several key aspects of teacher approachability: getting to know students, having enthusiasm for teaching, displaying a sense of humor, being encouraging, recognizes students out of class, moving around the classrooms, listening to students' concerns/questions, not humiliating students, being down to earth, and care about helping students to success.

Research conducted by Delaney, et al., (n.d) to 17,000 university students found that the students had identified the following characteristics of an effective teacher such as, respectful, knowledgeable, approachable, engaging, communicative, organized, responsive, professional, and humorous. The students identified approachable as a characteristic of effective teaching behaviors using adjectives that include friendly, personable, helpful, accessible, happy, and positive.

Delcore (n.d) conducted a series of focus groups of 49 students on his campus in 2009-2010 about student expectations of assignment prompts. He came to a conclusion that the students expected their teacher to give clear assignments (clarity) and be approachable (approachability).

Efiritha, et al. (2014) conducted a descriptive survey to a convenient sample of 110 students in Zimbabwean university and found that preparedness, enthusiasm in teaching and learning, content mastery, approachability, use of different teaching approaches and providing accessible references were the attributes perceived as important by the students under study.

Another research conducted by Heikinnen et al. (2014) in Finland vocational education setting found that the 65 students under study perceived the important characteristics of vocational education teacher as professional, approachable, and fair.

On the basis of the findings above, it was concluded that effective teaching behavior of approachability became one of the important prerequisites for effective teaching that should be possessed by a competent teacher.

2.3.2 Subject Matter mastery

Merriam Webster Dictionary defines mastery as “knowledge and skills that allows you to do, use, or understand something very well; skill or knowledge that makes one master of a subject.

An operational definition is provided by Collins dictionary. Mastery is “full command or understanding of a subject; outstanding skill; expertise.” This definition is also supported by the definition stated in oxford dictionary, comprehensive knowledge or skills in a subject or accomplishments.”

The term mastery of subject matter is described by Grossman (1989) as the basis of a discipline (information, organizing principles and central concepts). Teachers must know the subjects they are to teach. Thus, the mastery of subject matter is necessary (Singer, 2003, p. 39).

The theoretical bases developed the concepts for teacher subject matter mastery that a teacher should master the contents of their subject matter (Kyriacou, 2011).

Based on the concepts above, it was concluded that the mastery of subject matter becomes another essential characteristics of a competent teacher because teachers are responsible for helping students learn worthwhile content. In this case, they must know and understand the subjects they teach and in order to connect students and subject matter in age-appropriate and meaningful ways.

2.3.3 Teaching Clarity

Clear teaching is a prerequisite for student learning (Tittsworth, n.d). this is strongly supported by Rosenshine and Furst (1971) who argue that teacher clarity is central to effective teaching. Reviewing the literature, there are varying ideas on what constitutes effective teaching (BrckaLorenz, et al., (2011). Teaching clarity is one that is often referenced when discussing the characteristics of effective teaching (Feldman, 1989; Hativa, 1998; Sherman et al., 1987).

Teaching clarity was a conception that a teacher should teach the contents in a clear way that makes the students easy to understand (e.g. Chesebro, 1998; Chesebro and McCroskey, n.d.; Civikly, 1992; Hines, & Knox, 2001; Murray, 1983).

A clear teacher, according to Kennedy, Cruickshank, Bush, and Myers (1978, p. 7) teaches new concepts and content in a simple way, often uses relevant examples and creates chances for learners to think about and respond to the content.

In reviewing the literature, teaching clarity is also associated with other terms such as:

- teacher clarity (e.g. Chesebro, 1998; Chesebro and Mc Croskey, ; Civikly, 1992: Cruickshank, 1989; Rosenshine and Furst, 1971, 1973; Simonds, 1997);
- lesson clarity (e.g. Hativa, 2000);
- instructional clarity (e.g. Hines, 1981: Kennedy, et al., 1978; Rosenshine and Furst, 1971; Snyder 1991, 1995);
- clarity in teaching (e.g. Hativa, 2000);
- instructor clarity (e.g. Tittsworth, n.d); and

- clarity of presentation (e.g. Stones and Morris, 1972).

On defining teaching clarity, Hines (1981) notes that clarity is a state in which teacher who is in command of the subject matter to be transmitted is able to do that which is required to communicate with learners successfully. Further, Hines also explains that clear teaching refers to the ability of the teacher to provide instruction, expositions or otherwise, which helps students.

Metcalf (1992) defines teaching clarity as “the ability of the teacher to provide instruction, expositional or otherwise, which helps students come to a clear understanding of the material.” Thus clarity is something achieved by the student, not by the teacher.

Looking at the importance of clear teaching provided by teachers in delivering the lessons, this study adopted teaching clarity as one of effective teaching behaviors that should be possessed by a teacher.

2.3.4 Instructional Delivery

Instruction is a process in which teachers apply a set of instructional strategies to communicate and interact with students around academic content and to support student engagement. Another term for instruction is teaching. Good teaching does not just happen; it must be well planned and must be aligned in several ways (Tileston, 2004, p. 1). Good learning depends on good teaching and good teachers produce good students (Biggs, 1999).

Teacher instructional delivery refers to the variety of instructions a teacher used in teaching (Good and Brophy, 1986; Hay McBer, 2000; Rosenshine, 1979; Stronge, 2012). Hativa (2000) notes that instructional delivery is an important key behavior of effective teaching that are the variability or flexibility of delivery during the presentation of a lesson.

Another term relates to instructional delivery is instructional variety, coined by Brophy (2002), Brophy and Good (1986), Marzano, et al., (2004). The term refers to teacher variability or flexibility delivery during the presentation of a lesson plan.

On the importance of instructional delivery, Rivkin, Hanushek & Kain (2005) argue that teachers who instruct differently in their classroom vary significantly in their ability to help students grow academically.

Stronge (2012) makes a conclusion that on the differences between effective and ineffective teachers lies more fundamentally in the manner in which they deliver their knowledge and skills while interacting with the students in their classrooms.

Based on the premises above, the study also adopted the term of instructional delivery as one of effective teaching behaviors that should be possessed by a teacher.

2.4 Students' Perceptions of Competent EFL Teachers

This study concerns with English students' perceptions of a competent EFL teacher.

Research has shown that there is also a strong link between what students characterize as good teaching and what the research reports as the traits of competent teachers. For example, Cashin (1988); Marsh, (1987); Ryan and Harrison (1995) found that students' perceptions of learning were a useful measure of the instructional behaviors and were highly correlated with their overall ratings of teaching effectiveness.

There are many terms used to describe student' perceptions of teacher and teaching. Each of the phrases has slightly different connotations, depending on whether they emphasize students, courses, ratings, or evaluation (Gravestock & Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008, p. 12).

The most common terms used in the publications concerning students' perceptions are:

- students' feedback (e.g. Keane & Mac Labhrainn, 2005);
- students' perceptions (e.g. Brennan and Williams, 2010; Sutcliff, 2011);
- students' evaluation (e.g. Murray, 2005; Simmons, 1997; Stein et al, 2012);
- students' survey (e.g. Chaplin et al, 2014)
- students rating (e.g. Erdle, Murray, and Rushton, 1985; Lawall, 2006),
- students perspective (e.g. Spencer and Schmelkin, 2002);
- student perceptions survey (e.g. Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012);
- student course evaluations (e.g. Gravestock and Gregor-Greenleaf, 2008); and
- learner voice (Lyle, Hendley, and Newcomb, 2010).

This study used the term students' perceptions followed the work of Brennan and Williams, 2010; Gorham and Christophel, 1992 and several relevant theories. In this study, the students were asked to convey their perceptions of the important characteristics of a competent English teacher in terms of effective teaching behavior of approachability, subject matter mastery, teaching clarity and instructional delivery.

Research has also shown that student surveys are reliable and valid measures of teacher effectiveness (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 2012). Indeed, we must not rely too heavily on student surveys—or any single measure of teacher performance. Instead, we have to use multiple reliable measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the teacher when she performs her classroom practice.

Student surveys may help the teacher set goals for continuous improvement and may provide feedback directly to the teacher that helps identify the need for professional growth and development. Student surveys may also be used to provide information to evaluators that may not be accurately obtained during observation or through other types of documentation

3. Methodology

In this study, mixed methods case study research was used to capture and understand the cases under investigation in full depth and in its natural settings and from the perspective of the participants involved in the phenomenon (Merriam, 1988; Yin, 1994).

This mixed method case study put qualitative and quantitative data together using triangulation design (Singh Malik and Abdul Hamied, 2014, p. 272). This study used questionnaire (N=318) and focus group interview (N=45) to collect data on how the English learners perceived the most important characteristics of a competent EFL teacher. The responds are coded and categorized based on the most frequent characteristics listed by the students and by using thematic analysis.

The study took place in two junior high schools located in West Java Province, Indonesia.

4. Findings

4.1 Findings from Student Questionnaire

The open-ended question stated in the questionnaire tried to capture what important characteristics should be possessed by a competent English teacher as perceived by the students. The students were asked to list five important characteristics of a competent English teacher. Not all students provided five characteristics as required. Some wrote only one or two characteristics.

A total of 997 responses were obtained from open ended questionnaire. The responses were then put into the four categories of effective teaching behaviors of approachability, subject matter mastery and instructional delivery.

The summary of the important characteristics of a competent English teacher as perceived by the students are presented in Table 1 below.

Table 1 The five most important characteristics of a competent English teacher from questionnaire

Effective teaching behavior category	Sum	Rank
Approachability	508	1
Teaching clarity	231	2
Instructional delivery	217	3
Subject matter mastery	41	4
Total responds	997	

The table shows that the first most important characteristic of a competent English teacher as perceived by the English learners is approachability (N=508), followed by, in order of rank, teaching clarity (N=231), instructional delivery (N=217), and subject matter mastery (N=41).

4.2 Findings from focus group interview

As many as forty-five English learners contributed in the focus group interview to share their perceptions regarding the characteristics of a competent English teacher. Each learner was assigned to mention five important characteristics. As many as one hundred and seventy six responds uttered by them. The characteristics were then grouped into four effective teaching behavior categories of approachability, subject matter mastery, teaching clarity, and instructional delivery.

The five most important characteristics of a competent English teacher as perceived by the English learners obtained from focus group interview are presented in table 2 below.

Table 2 The five most important characteristics of a good/competent English teacher from focus group interview

Effective teaching behavior category	Sum	Rank
Approachability	57	1
Instructional delivery	56	2
Teaching clarity	42	3
Subject matter mastery	6	4
Total responds	176	

The table shows that the first most important characteristic of a competent English teacher as perceived by the English learners is approachability (N=57), followed by, in order of rank, instructional delivery (N=56), teaching clarity (N=42), and subject matter mastery (N=6).

5. Discussions

This study was aimed to explore the issues raised in the study, in particular by pupils, about important characteristics of a competent EFL teacher. The findings obtained from questionnaire and focus group interview reveal that English learners perceive that a competent English teacher is someone who is approachable to them (e.g. is nice and cares to them, is friendly, is helpful, shows enthusiasm towards students and their learning, is accessible). The findings also show that basically, English learners feel happy and comfortable to know that their English teacher is approachable for them.

The capacity of young people to evaluate what important characteristics should possess by a competent teacher is a resource which can be used positively to support English teacher to show positive attitudes towards students and their learning. Coleman (1995) argues that students are the best sources of evidence on good teachers. Students are those who live day-to-day with teachers (Marsh, 1987) and see them in their darkest, as well as their brightest, periods (MacBeath et al., 1999, p. 53).

6. Conclusions

The major conclusion taken from the study reveal that, besides having good command of subject matter knowledge (subject matter mastery) and possessing certain teaching skills to deliver the lessons in the classroom (instructional delivery) to make students clear about the lessons they are learning (teaching clarity), an English teacher is expected to be approachable (approachability) to their students.

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