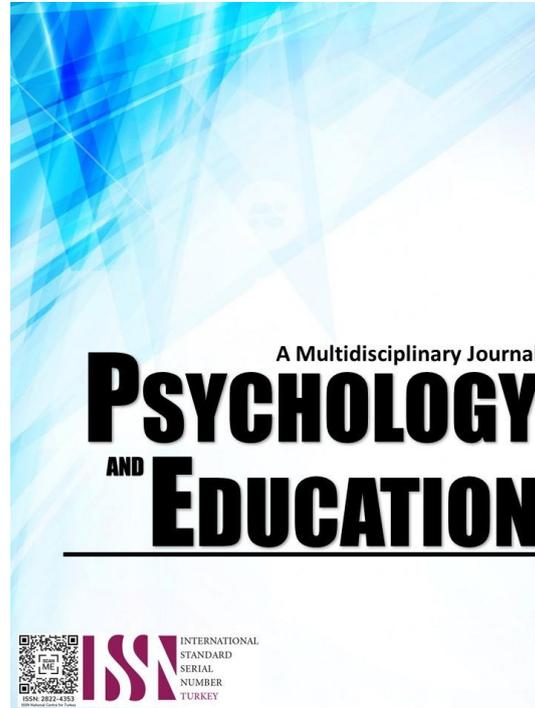


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Effective 21st Century Teachers: An Analysis of Students' Perspectives

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Abstract

This study looked into the characteristics of effective teachers of today as perceived by the 121 Engineering, Business, and IT students at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences, Al Musannah (UTAS-A), Oman. The results showed that students put more emphasis on the personal and interpersonal attributes of the teachers over their pedagogical skills, where 67.26% of the total responses account for the former while 32.74% comprise the latter. Further, findings revealed that teachers who are helpful and supportive, smile a lot/friendly, respectful of their students, and kind/magnanimous are effective according to students. In terms of pedagogical skills, the respondents believe that effective teachers are the ones who can teach well and explain clearly, make learning fun and creative, and give more class activities or practice.

Keywords: *interpersonal skills, effective teachers, effective teaching, personal skills, pedagogical skills*

Introduction

With the revolutionary changes in the teaching and learning field, effective teachers' characteristics are now highlighted more than ever. While the educational trend is focused more on the learners, it requires much more from the teacher. According to Palmer (2015), teaching in the 21st century is an altogether different phenomenon; never before could learning happen the way it is now - everywhere, all the time, on any possible topic, supporting any possible learning style or preference. As Varlas (2009) puts it, today, teacher effectiveness is the single most important school-based factor in student success. Thus, this issue is continuously being investigated by researchers far and wide to allow the generation of a vast array of effective teaching strategies and techniques and attributes or characteristics that may help teachers effectively bring about the best learning experience for their students in this ever-changing world.

While there is no secret formula for becoming a good or effective teacher, it would be both defeatist and counter-intuitive not to observe certain general principles that many good teachers have in common (Prodrumou, 1991). It is then the aim of this study to determine the students' perceived sought-after characteristics of effective teachers. Defining effective or good teachers, however, is not easy. As mentioned by Stronge (2018), when we consider the complex task required in teaching, teachers' effectiveness is such an elusive concept. Add to this, teachers' effectiveness is measured in many ways, including but not limited to student performance in tests, performance ratings based on student feedback

and classroom observations, staff appraisal results, and several recognitions conferred by awarding bodies and institutions. These overarching criteria in measuring teacher effectiveness make it challenging to define an effective teacher.

Nonetheless, despite the complexities surrounding this issue, students gauge effective teachers in terms of their personal and interpersonal characteristics and pedagogical skills. In this study, personal and interpersonal characteristics refer to the teacher's distinct individual traits and style in interacting and communicating with people. In contrast, pedagogical skills generally refer to the teacher's teaching and classroom management skills. In this undertaking, though, characteristics, skills, and attributes are used interchangeably.

The result of this study is hoped to guide teachers in dealing with their students of today and facilitating effective teaching and learning inside their classrooms. Further, the findings of this study will help concerned authorities craft staff professional development programs and enhance the recruitment and selection criteria for teachers joining the workforce.

Research Questions

This study aims to find out the perceived characteristics of effective 21st-century teachers. Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the common characteristics of effective teachers as perceived by students?
2. What are the most desirable characteristics of

effective teachers according to students?

Literature Review

Teachers of today are assessed in various ways using many different lenses. As such, teachers who leave a lifelong impact on their students are mostly hailed as more effective than others. This creates the impression that teachers' effectiveness greatly lies in the extent of their positive influence on their students. On the other hand, teachers who have displayed impressive mastery of their craft are also regarded as ideal or best teachers. These and many other seemingly opposing perspectives prove that effective teaching is multifaceted.

In an effort to help shed light on what makes teachers effective, in 2016, Al Busaidi and Buyukyavuz conducted a study to find out the characteristics of effective university instructors as perceived by Turkish and Omani students. This study revealed that those regarded as compelling are the ones whose personal characteristics include showing respect and care about their students as people, listening to students, and being dependable. Add to these, the same investigation recorded that as far as teaching characteristics are concerned, teachers who are prepared for the lesson and are able to clearly explain their lessons are perceived as effective by Turkish and Omani students.

Another undertaking that dealt with this matter was held three years earlier in Cyprus. Students shared their perceptions with Kourioeus and Evripidou (2013) about what makes EFL teachers effective in the university setting. According to the findings of this study, EFL university teachers having personal and interpersonal characteristics such as being friendly to students, eager to help in and outside of the classroom, and taking into consideration students' difficulties are perceived as effective. Moreover, the same respondents highlighted that in terms of knowledge of the subject matter, those with a broad vocabulary and who can use the language competently are deemed as effective. Kourioeus and Evripidou (2013) added that the Cypriot students think that as far as the approach to language teaching is concerned, effective teachers make frequent use of various materials, expose students to real-life topics and administer pair or small group works.

In Thailand, Wichadee and Oriwawatnakul (2012) investigated the views of low and high-proficiency students regarding the characteristics of effective language teachers. The results showed that

organization skills, communication skills, and proficiency in English are essential attributes of an effective teacher. This leaves no room for debate since these are language teachers and are primarily expected to have excellent communication skills and are able to use the language with ease. It is a different story, though, in the case of college students in the US as found out by Okpala and Ellis in 2005. The students believe that quality teachers care for their students and their learning process. These respondents focused more on the personal attributes of the teachers than their teaching skills. In Iran, Birjandi and Rezanejad (2014) embarked on a similar study and discovered that students consider those who have the ability to encourage student participation and have previous teaching experience as effective teachers.

A closer look at all these studies would show that the characteristics of effective teachers as perceived by students are more similar than different. For instance, while others prefer interpersonal attributes over teaching skills, there seems to be a converging point where certain characteristics stand out regardless of the study's locale and population.

This study then sought to determine the characteristics of effective teachers as perceived by Omani students in an attempt to add to the corpus of knowledge regarding this topic and to provide a ready guide for teachers. Moreover, the findings of this study can be used as a reference in developing staff professional development programs and as bases for strengthening the recruitment and selection criteria for teachers who wish to join the teaching workforce.

Methodology

This research used the qualitative research method. The participants were asked to describe their favorite/best teacher. In their descriptive paragraph, the participants were to identify/enumerate the qualities of their favorite/best teacher and explain what makes that teacher the best and most effective. The qualitative responses of the participants in this study were then sorted and analyzed. From this analysis, a list of qualities of effective teachers was generated. These listed qualities were then classified as either "Personal and Interpersonal (P&IP) Characteristics" or "Pedagogical Skills (PS)".

Participants/Respondents

The study's respondents were 121 Engineering, IT, and Business students who were at their Diploma

Level (Post-Foundation) and taking up Technical Writing II at UTAS-A. These Omani students have completed their primary and secondary education and general foundation studies.

Instruments of the Study

As part of their writing exercise in the course at the beginning of the semester, the students were asked to write a descriptive paragraph about their favorite/best teacher on a piece of paper. The students were asked to freely enumerate their favorite/best teacher's characteristics that make him/her the best and most effective.

Procedure

The write-ups were collected at the end of the given time. These written outputs were analyzed focusing on the identified characteristics of the students' favorite/best teachers. The listed characteristics were tabulated and categorized as personal and interpersonal characteristics or pedagogical skills. Next, a frequency count was conducted, allowing the recording of the number of responses collected and the number of times each teacher characteristic recurred. This facilitated the identification of the number of responses falling under personal and interpersonal characteristics or pedagogical skills. Then, the results under each category were ranked from the most frequently recurring to the least.

Results and Discussion

The data presented, analyzed, and interpreted in this section is taken from the written outputs collected from the 121 respondents.

Characteristics of Effective 21st-Century Teachers

Numerous research findings in the past have generated a range of exemplary teachers' characteristics ranging from mastery of subject matter to a sense of humor. In this study, the respondents put forward a list of characteristics of effective teachers where personal and interpersonal characteristics were deemed more critical over pedagogical or teaching skills.

Table 1. *Characteristics of Effective 21st-Century Teachers*

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Personal & Interpersonal (P&IP)	341	67.26
Pedagogical Skills (PS)	166	32.74
Total	507	100

As seen from Table 1, out of 507 times, 341, or 67.26% of which accounts for the times P&IP characteristics emerged while 166, or 32.74% only of the responses cover PS. This implies that teachers' effectiveness, as perceived by the respondents, is greatly influenced by behavior, attitude, and their ability to connect and deal with their students. This is explained by Adams and Pierce (1999) as mentioned by Zamani and Ahangari (2016) saying that personal traits are equally important in the learning process as is mastery of teaching. This underscores the importance of establishing rapport with students to create an environment conducive to learning. Weimer (2010) also puts forward the same idea positing that "rapport does not result in learning, but it certainly helps to create conditions conducive to learning—things like higher motivation, increased comfort, and enhanced communication."

This too is previously espoused by Richards (2002), as cited by Baytur and Razi (2015), stating that creating a friendly classroom atmosphere, planning different learning activities, and using educational materials represent an effective teacher's professional duties. From these studies, it is apparent that effective teachers are those with the right attitude and proper knowledge and training in teaching. Thompson (2008), in his study, supports the importance of the teacher's personal qualities claiming that an effective teacher blends well-built teaching skills with good character traits. While the result of this study demonstrates that the respondents are more inclined toward the personal and interpersonal characteristics of the teachers than toward the pedagogical skills, this does not mean that pedagogical or teaching skills are not given due significance. It simply indicates that the respondents of this current study give emphasis on personal and interpersonal characteristics more than pedagogical skills.



Table 2. *Personal and Interpersonal Characteristics of Effective 21st-Century Teachers*

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Helpful/Supportive	90	48.39
Smiles a lot/ Friendly	47	25.27
Respects students	25	13.44
Kind	24	12.90
Total	186	100

Table 2 presents the recurring P&IP characteristics ranked according to their number of recurrences. From the data, “helpful/supportive” comes first followed by “smiles a lot/ friendly” then “respects students” and “kind”. The finding of this study is almost parallel with that of Al Busaidi’s and Buyukyavuz’s findings (2016) where their respondents listed the personal characteristics of effective teachers as “cares about students as people,” “respective of students,” “does not underestimate the students’ worth,” “listens to students,” and “a person whom students can depend on.” Along the same vein, Misigo, et al. in their study in 2014 found out that the qualities characterizing an effective teacher according to their respondents include: caring and understanding, fair to all learners, patient and respectful, emotionally stable, willing to help and warm and friendly to learners. Their results coincided with the findings of prior studies conducted by Day (2004), HayMcbcr (2000), and Robertson (1996). While there are slight variations in terms of the identified personal and interpersonal characteristics of these previous research with those of the recurring attributes determined by the respondents of the current study, it is apparent that teachers who are deemed effective by students are those who extend support and display friendliness, respect, and gentleness with their students. Further analysis of the students’ write-ups reveals that those who offer advice, encourage/motivate their students to learn, and show care or concern for students’ well-being are seen as helpful or supportive teachers. “Being friendly” or “smiling a lot” is the second characteristic considered by the respondents as one of the attributes of effective teachers. While this concurs with the result of the studies by Saraç-Süzer (2007), Telli, et al. (2008), and Çelik, et al. (2013), it is worth noting that this quality comes second in this current study as opposed to it being the most desirable characteristic of effective teachers in the previous studies mentioned. The students explained that teachers who smile a lot make them more comfortable in class resulting in them feeling relaxed and inspired to learn and participate. In the words of Baytur and Razi (2015), “friendliness, as opposed to strictness, becomes a basic characteristic that any effective teacher should possess”. This result is consistent with the finding of the studies conducted

by Cheung (2006) as mentioned by Dincer, et.al. (2013), Arıkan et al. (2008), Shishavan (2010), Wichadee and Orawiwatnakul (2012), and Erbay, et al. (2014) concluded that friendliness is one of the most important attributes of a language teacher.

The finding of this current study also shows that respecting students is among the attributes of effective teachers according to the students. This supports Orlando’s (2013) claim that “a great teacher that respects students creates a welcoming learning environment for all of them.” In their written output, the students rationalize that the best and most effective teachers know how to treat their students respectfully while maintaining that teacher-student relationship inside the classroom. Some respondents clarified that respect means teachers do not deliberately embarrass their students or draw unnecessary attention toward them.

Being kind or sympathetic to students’ situations or challenges is identified as one characteristic of effective teachers as put forward by the respondents in this study. This is further elucidated in the collected output where some students shared that teachers who display gentle behavior in class are effective. Other P&IP characteristics of effective teachers identified by the respondents but are not as frequently recurring as the ones discussed above include honesty, seriousness/strictness, being handsome/beautiful/pretty, modesty, treating students equally, treating students like his/her sons (children)/brother/sister, being energetic/active, hardworking, being organized, giving positive ideas/advice and having a good education.

Table 3 below shows the pedagogical skills of effective teachers listed by the students. The data were presented from the most to the least frequently recurring skill.

Table 3. *Pedagogical Skills of Effective 21st-Century Teachers*

<i>Characteristics</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage</i>
Teaches well and explains clearly	89	61.38
Makes learning fun and creative	40	27.59
Gives more class activities/practice	16	11.03
Total	145	100

As indicated in Table 3, those who teach and explain

well, make learning fun and administer more classroom activities are effective teachers as perceived by the respondents.

The data show that students prefer those teachers with the ability to make lessons easy to understand. In their descriptive paragraph, the respondents openly shared their view that effective teachers are those who simplify lessons and have evident mastery of their course. Further to this, the students also explained that teachers' ability to teach and explain in class also speaks about their intelligence and ingenuity in linking ideas and concepts with real-life situations. This result concurs with the finding of Kourieos and Evripidou (2013) where the participants also emphasized the need to involve students in group tasks designed around real-life topics. This underscores the impact of connecting lessons to observable phenomena or contextualized situations to create a realistic and relevant learning experience for students. In addition, the respondents of this study clarified that teachers who teach well have excellent communication skills which enable them to effectively and clearly explain the lesson. This aligns with the finding put forward by Wichadee and Oriwawatnakul (2012) in their research conducted among learners in Thailand where their respondents ranked organization and communication skills as the most important characteristic of an effective language teacher. While the latter focuses on language teachers' characteristics, having excellent communication skills is definitely a paramount requirement for all teachers. The teacher's primary objective to facilitate learning and promote understanding of concepts can only be achieved through clear and effective communication between the teacher and the students.

In this study, it is no surprise that the respondents consider those teachers who make learning fun and creative as effective teachers. This is because one of the personal and interpersonal characteristics they identified as desirable and a mark of teachers' effectiveness is being friendly and smiling a lot. Moreover, a closer analysis of the students' explanation reveals that fun and creative learning for them means teachers are using different teaching methods and strategies, utilizing technology, showing videos, and using PPTs when teaching. This finding agrees with the preference revealed by Aregbeyen (2010). In this research conducted at the University of Ibadan, Nigeria, the identified ten elements of effective teaching include clear explanations and an exciting presentation style.

Another aspect of the findings of this study is that

effective teachers give more class activities/practice/exercises inside the classroom. This implies that the respondents of this undertaking believe that effective teachers provide their students with classroom exercises to allow them to put into practice whatever is discussed. Furthermore, these activities afford students the opportunity to discover their level of understanding and, at the same time, assess how well or poorly they are faring in a particular lesson even before a quiz or test. Similarly, Wichadee and Oriwawatnakul (2012) also revealed that both low and high-proficiency students wanted their teachers to provide many more activities or exercises in order to help improve their learning.

UTAS-A students also listed other least recurring pedagogical skills that their favorite and best teachers display. These other characteristics include preparing their students for the lesson, giving them time to participate, asking questions, making students relax, and starting class on time. Moreover, they feel that effective teachers are those who give good marks and rewards, control the class, and have organized writing on the board. One peculiar skill that a few participants of this study endorsed is the ability to translate English to Arabic. This indicates their need to understand what is being discussed in class. In Oman, the medium of instruction in tertiary education is English. Translating English words to Arabic is not a practice, and knowledge of the Arabic language is not a requirement for teachers who are applying to join the teaching workforce in the Sultanate. While this may be so, it is worth noting that teachers must ensure that students understand the lesson at hand. This does not mean translating though. It simply means that teachers should always check for comprehension.

Conclusion

This study investigated and analyzed the characteristics of effective teachers as perceived by the students at the University of Technology and Applied Sciences-Al Musannah (UTAS-A), Sultanate of Oman. From the descriptive paragraphs submitted by the students, a list of effective teachers' characteristics was generated and these characteristics were classified as either personal and interpersonal characteristics or pedagogical skills. Frequency counting was done to determine recurring characteristics which were then ranked according to the number of times they recurred.

Results reveal that the participants put more weight on the teachers' personal and interpersonal (P&IP) characteristics than on their pedagogical skills (PS).

This is shown by the higher number of identified P&IP characteristics and their higher frequency compared to a much lesser number of PS listed and also of their lesser recurrence. Specifically, the findings of this study indicate that among the P&IP characteristics, being helpful, smiling a lot, showing respect to students, and being kind are the frequently recurring characteristics of effective teachers. The least recurring P&IP characteristics are honest, serious/strict, handsome/beautiful/pretty, modest, treats students equally, treats students like his sons (children)/brother/sister, energetic/active, hardworking, organized, gives positive ideas/advice and has a good education.

On the other hand, “teaches well and explains clearly”, “makes learning fun and creative”, and “gives more class activities/practice” were found to be the most recurring PS of effective teachers as perceived by the participants. Meanwhile, those that were also identified by the respondents as PS of effective teachers but not as frequently mentioned as those above are “prepares students for the lesson”, “gives students time to participate and ask questions”, “makes students relax”, and “starts class on time”, “gives good marks and rewards”, “controls the class”, “has organized writing on the board”, and “translates English words to Arabic”.

Based on these findings, it is clear that students have varied perspectives on what makes teachers effective. While there is no one-size-fits-all in teaching, it is apparent that teachers’ effectiveness lies in their personal and interpersonal attributes and pedagogical skills as perceived by the students. This said these identified qualities of effective teachers can help them understand their students better and can serve as teachers’ guides in adopting a more flexible and informed approach, when necessary and appropriate, towards assisting their students to learn effectively.

It could also help to consider utilizing the result of this study as a reference in organizing staff professional development program/activities where further strengthening and/or honing of key personal and interpersonal characteristics and pedagogical skills is put to the fore. In addition, members of the selection and recruitment committees should also be informed of these sought-after characteristics of teachers in order for them to strategize and enhance their criteria in choosing the most qualified candidates.

Since this study covers only a limited number of students, it is recommended that a more comprehensive investigation on this matter be

conducted to include General Foundation Program (GFP) students as well as those who are in their Advanced Diploma level. This will allow the generation of a much broader perspective. Moreover, future researchers may look at the differences in students’ perceptions of the characteristics of effective teachers according to specialization and gender.

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