

Personality or Pedagogy: Which personal characteristics are necessary for ESL teachers to possess and what role do they play compared to formal pedagogical training in ESL teaching?

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Abstract

Educators need to acknowledge that inexperienced ESL (English as a Second Language) teachers may feel that the possession of certain personal characteristics is more important than pedagogical training. This study indicates the importance of providing opportunities for prospective teachers to foster certain personal characteristics in preparation of teaching, along with traditional pedagogical training. The participants in the study were American volunteers teaching English in Asian who were asked what personal qualities they relied on the most during their ESL teaching experience. They cited the following personal qualities as the three most important to possess: patience, creativity and flexibility. They were also asked to rank the following categories of knowledge in order of importance: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, personal knowledge/characteristics, and cultural knowledge. The volunteers cited personal knowledge/characteristics as most important with the highest frequency, followed by content knowledge, then cultural knowledge, and cited the most important with the lowest frequency was pedagogical knowledge. Teacher training programs must address the perceived need of certain personal characteristics required for effective ESL teaching, the role these characteristics play, and their importance compared with pedagogical training in the making of successful English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers.

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Personality or Pedagogy?

What is the most important factor influencing teacher effectiveness? Is it personality or pedagogy? Is it content knowledge or cultural knowledge? Taylor and Wasicsko (2000) posit that it is a combination of all these, defining personality or disposition as “the personal qualities or characteristics that are possessed by individuals, including attitudes, beliefs, interests, appreciations, values, and modes of adjustment” (p. 2).

The United States National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (2008) places importance on teacher dispositions and states that: “Candidates [must

be able to] work with students, families, colleagues, and communities in ways that reflect the professional dispositions expected of professional educators ... Candidates [must] recognize when their own professional dispositions may need to be adjusted and are able to develop plans to do so” (p. 22).

C.R. Rogers (1969), a leader in the field of educational psychology, stated:

I see the facilitation of learning as the aim of education ... We know ... that the initiation of such learning rests not upon the teaching skills of the leader, not upon his scholarly knowledge of the field, not upon his curricular planning, not upon his use of audio-visual aids, not upon the programmed learning he utilizes, not upon his lectures and presentations, not upon an abundance of books, though each of these at one time or another be utilized as an important resource. No, the facilitation of significant learning rests upon certain attitudinal qualities which exist in the personal relationship between the facilitator and the learner. (pp. 105–106)

In an effort to document the nature and effective practice of helping professions (e.g., educators), Combs (1969) set out to design a perceptual framework from which to understand behaviour from the point of view of the behavior rather than the external viewer. In addition to using the terms “dispositions” and “perceptions” interchangeably, Combs (1974) also believed that educators who have helping dispositions have positive perceptions of self and other people and this outlook positively affects student behaviour.

According to Marchbanks (2000), ‘

Teachers in the twenty- first century are responsible for the overall well-being of their students, as well as educating, disciplining, and stimulating their developing minds. Because teachers have these additional duties, many more requirements are needed to be an effective teacher than simply an education and a certificate. Certain personality traits are necessary to be able to accomplish all of these tasks and duties. One must be passionate, patient, cooperative, authoritative, and creative in order to be an effective teacher. (p. 2)

Stronge (2002) in his review of research to define teacher behaviours that contribute to student achievement describes six dispositions of effective teachers including: caring, fairness and respect, enthusiasm and motivation, reflective practice, positive attitude toward teaching, and friendly and personal interactions with students. His findings support the view that dispositions that lead to successful teaching are related to personal attributes and the quality of interpersonal interactions.

Weiner and Cohen (2003) suggest that teacher trainers should be attentive to newly admitted candidates’ disposition

... not to judge them but to create a baseline from which to gauge incremental changes and to learn more about the diversity of beliefs and values among pre-service teachers ... We should be developing ongoing assessments of dispositions so that we can identify and better understand the impact of training efforts that extend and transform dispositions over time. (p. 2)

Cripps-Clark and Walsh (2004) claim that within teacher training programs, personal characteristics should be included in the model of an effective teacher. “Teacher educators are in the business of creating effective teachers and as such, need a clear, evidence-based model of an effective teacher” (p. 1). They suggest a model of an effective teacher which not only emphasises the domains in teacher education which receive the most attention, namely content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge but also considers teacher’s personal knowledge and knowledge of context.

Calbrese, Goodvin, and Niles (2005) identify the attitudes and traits of effective teachers who worked in a multi-cultural urban high school with a high at-risk student population and confirm that effective teachers were “culturally responsive ... flexible and caring” (p. 1).

Snider (2006) admits that: “Teacher quality is an elusive concept ... I have found there is usually high agreement about who is an excellent teacher, even among educators with very different philosophical perspectives. The cream rises and it’s easy to see” (p. 86). Snider goes to define good teachers as individuals who have desirable personal attributes or dispositions, know how to teach, and have access to effective curricula. She also admits that evidence that innate personal attributes influence student performance is limited.

Despite the numbers of studies that have been carried out, there is no consensus in the identification of dispositions or personal characteristics that are necessary for effective teaching or how they might be used in selecting and educating teachers. Wasicsko (2002) asserts that dispositions are not available for direct measurement. Facing the difficulty of identification and measurement of dispositions, teacher educators need to design experiences that will help prospective teachers discover and develop intrapersonal characteristics that will lead to effective teaching (Taylor & Wasicsko, 2000).

The abovementioned literature points to the acknowledgement of leaders in education of the importance of the possession of certain personal characteristics that lead to successful teaching and also the difficulty of identification and measurement. The analysis of the data presented in this study sheds light on the perceptions that a specific group of inexperienced ESL teachers have about which personal characteristics lead to success in the classroom and their importance when compared with pedagogical training. In order for teacher training programs to prepare potential teachers to be the best educators they can be, students must be given opportunities to identify, access and develop personal characteristics before they enter the classroom.

The Research Design

The analysis presented in this study is based on data collected from the participants of a program that recruits college-age volunteers to teach ESL in Asia. The program is described on the organisation’s Web site as follows:

Your skills as a native English speaker are urgently needed right now in Asia. Teach English and build quality relationships with college students, professionals, or K-12 students who are the present and future leaders of China, Mongolia, Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia. No foreign language experience is required. You do not have to be a teacher by profession. [Our organization] provides all the training

required for your successful experience in Asia...[Our organization] is a non-profit educational organization, dedicated to sending Christian English teachers to East Asia. [Our organization] recruits, selects, trains, and helps place qualified teachers in Asian universities. Asia's demanding modernization program encourages Asian people to study English. Our teachers are able to establish lasting relationships as they share personal and eternal values with eager students. Working with Asia's future leaders requires programs that are sensitive to exhibit professional and personal integrity. (The Web site address and name of the organisation is being withheld at their request.)

Since pedagogical training or classroom experience was not required of the volunteer/participants in this program, I was curious about the training that the organisation offered to its participants. I contacted the director of the program who was very accommodating and provided me with information about the program. I chose to focus on participants who had recently completed a four or five-week ESL teaching assignment in Asia. The training provided for the participants was a three-day workshop held in the United States prior to travelling to Asia; training consisted of a review of a curriculum that had been developed by the organisation. The curriculum was designed like a script and teachers were told they had some freedom to veer away from the script if they felt they needed to but were discouraged from doing this. The curriculum was centred on the theme of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, which was very appropriate for the students. The activities were interesting and very student-centred. Besides its very prescriptive nature, it looked like a curriculum that would capture the interest of students.

The training, however, seemed inadequate. Since the volunteers were not required to have experience and the training was minimal, I became curious about the volunteer teachers' opinions about the following:

- their prior experience or lack thereof,
- the personal characteristics they thought would be necessary to be a good ESL teacher,
- the personal characteristics they relied on the most during their ESL teaching experience,
- their perception of the order of importance of: content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, personal knowledge/characteristics, and cultural knowledge, and
- what they feel they would have benefited from that they hadn't received in their training.

I contacted the director of the program and asked for his help in obtaining the information for which I was looking. I suggested a survey and he agreed to help me obtain information from participants of the program by sending out a survey for me via e-mail to the participants of the most recent program in Asia that had been held during July–August 2008. He was very supportive and I promised I would share my results with him and the study participants so that the organisation could also benefit from the research and results. The respondents were contacted approximately one month after they returned to the U.S. following their teaching experience. The survey was anonymous and the participants were given the option of providing all, some or none of the information requested. I indicated in the survey that if the participant wanted to complete it, it should be emailed directly back to me. The director received permission from the participants for me to use their responses in this study.

All the participants were in their late teens to late twenties. A few of the participants (including the leaders) had been on similar trips with this organisation before. Gender and ethnicity were not taken into account because I believe that this information was insignificant for the purposes of this study.

The Survey

Below are the survey questions that were distributed to the participants:

What is/was your major in college?

Do/Did you have any prior teaching experience before your most recent (name of organisation) experience?

What qualities do you think are necessary to be a good ESL teacher?

What personal qualities did you rely on the most during your ESL teaching experience? (Please list or number in order of importance – feel free to explain your responses.)

Please list the following items in order of importance to successful ESL teaching (1 being the most important to 4 being the least important)

- -Content knowledge (i.e., ability to speak English fluently)
- -Pedagogical knowledge (i.e., general knowledge about how to teach)
- -Personal knowledge and characteristics (i.e., ability to collaborate with colleagues and supervisors, ability to form strong relationships with students, creativity, enthusiasm, etc.)
- -Cultural knowledge (i.e., understanding of cultural context and characteristics of learners in that culture)

What would you have benefited from that you didn't receive in your training?

Analysis

Following the procedures suggested by Archer (2007), the survey data were calculated by taking the total number of completed surveys overall and dividing by total number of surveys originally sent out and multiplying by 100 to obtain a response rate. Data to calculate percentages of responses to each survey question were calculated by dividing the total number of the same responses by the total number of responses and multiplying by 100. The response and their frequencies were entered onto an Excel spreadsheet developed for data entry. The data were then placed in the appropriate cells in the spreadsheet and data analysis was extracted.

The survey questions were distributed to 138 participants of the July-August 2008 group. Of the 138 surveys sent out, 44 or 32% were returned and the data were compiled from those surveys. According to Archer (2008), a 40% response rate is average for a needs assessment survey. Archer's statistics could be applied to this study since the survey used in this study was a combination of needs assessment and opinion. The response rate of this survey is slightly below average of that cited by Archer for this kind of survey.

The data extracted from the responses to question #1 (What is/was your major in college?) indicate that 45% of the respondents reported being education majors; 34% of this group are/were education majors with a concentration in a field other

than TESOL (Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) while 11% report their majors as being TESOL. It can be concluded that since 55% of the respondents are/were in non-education fields, they most likely have no formal pedagogical training. The respondents in this group reported their majors as being sociology/social work/anthropology (12%), psychology/human development (11%), business/economy/finance (7%), biology (5%), communications (5%), East Asian studies (2%), film (2%), history (2%), nursing (2%), international studies (2%), and other (5%).

The data obtained from question #2 (Do/Did you have any prior teaching experience before your most recent [name of organisation] experience?) indicate that approximately 66% of the respondents claim to have had some kind of teaching experience prior to this program while approximately 34% claim to have had no teaching experience. Slightly less than half (45%) are/were education majors (see data from question #1). Of the group of education majors, we do not know how much (if any) formal teacher training the participants received. The written responses of those claiming to have some prior teaching experience included experiences such as tutoring, counselling, volunteering, teaching in Christian education programs, and working with athletic groups. Only six respondents of the group with some prior teaching experience (21%) cited having an ESL teaching position or some formal pedagogical training: One volunteer said she had taught at a public school for two years; another had six years of experience as an ESL teacher in a public university and two years as a college instructor in a TESOL certificate program. One student indicated having completed student teaching and another said she had ‘a lot of field experience’; one had been in a teacher preparation program and another had taught ESL to children overseas for a short time.

The responses to question #3 (What qualities do you think are necessary to be a good ESL teacher?) identified 23 personal characteristics that the respondents believe are necessary for an ESL teacher to possess; they have been ranked in order of how many respondents mentioned them. The top ten qualities cited (in order) were patience, which was mentioned most often as a necessary quality, followed by creativity, flexibility, knowledge about the English language and second language acquisition, love for students, good communication skills, being open-minded, having cross-cultural understanding, having a passion for teaching, and having the ability to discipline. (The remaining qualities are listed. Refer to Table 1.)

Table 1: Qualities necessary to be a good ESL teacher

QUALITIES	Times cited	% of respondents	Rank
patience	32	73%	1
creativity	13	30%	2
flexibility	12	27%	3
knowledge about SLA/English	11	25%	4
love for Students	8	18%	Tie 5-6
good communication skills	8	18%	Tie 5-6
open-minded	7	16%	7
cross-cultural understanding	6	14%	Tie 8-9
passion for teaching	6	14%	Tie 8-9
ability to discipline	5	11%	10
organisational skills	4	9%	Tie 11-12
sense of humour	4	9%	Tie 11-12
kindness/caring	3	7%	Tie 13-16
ability to work w/others	3	7%	Tie 13-16
training in language teaching	3	7%	Tie 13-16
sociable	3	7%	Tie 13-16
energetic	2	5%	17
enthusiastic	1	2%	Tie 18-23
persistence	1	2%	Tie 18-23
empathy	1	2%	Tie 18-23
commitment/dedication	1	2%	Tie 18-23
goal-oriented	1	2%	Tie 18-23
believe in students	1	2%	Tie 18-23

In response to question #4 (What personal qualities did you rely on the most during your ESL teaching experience? Please list or number in order of importance – feel free to explain your responses.), respondents were not given a list from which to choose and were not asked to name a certain number of personal qualities. Respondents could list as many qualities as they wanted and the total number of qualities was not counted; however, the incidence of each quality was counted. Patience was cited as the top quality relied on, followed by creativity, flexibility, faith, humour, love, friendliness, compassion, cultural understanding, collaboration, teaching ability, perseverance, positive attitude, energy, openness, knowledge of English, good enunciation, leadership, organisation, communication skills, spontaneity and enjoyment. (Other qualities that were cited less than two times do not appear in the table. Refer to Table 2.)

Table 2: Personal qualities relied on the most (cited more than once)

Quality	Number of times cited	% of respondents
Patience	25	57%
Creativity	14	32%
Flexibility	9	20%
Faith	8	18%
Humour	6	14%
Love	5	11%
Friendliness	5	11%
Compassion	5	11%
cultural understanding	5	11%
collaboration	4	9%
teaching ability	4	9%
perseverance	4	9%
positive attitude	4	9%
Energy	4	9%
discipline	3	7%
openness	3	7%
knowledge of English	3	7%
preparation	2	5%
good enunciation	2	5%
leadership	2	5%
organisation	2	5%
communication skills	2	5%
spontaneity	2	5%
enjoyment	2	5%
Total number of respondents	44	100%

Question #5 was: ‘Please list the following items in order of importance to successful ESL teaching (1 being the most important to 4 being the least important)
 -Content knowledge (i.e., ability to speak English fluently)
 -Pedagogical knowledge (i.e., general knowledge about how to teach)
 -Personal knowledge and characteristics (i.e., ability to collaborate with colleagues and supervisors, ability to form strong relationships with students, creativity, enthusiasm, etc.)
 -Cultural knowledge (i.e., understanding of cultural context and characteristics of learners in that culture)’

In response to question #5, personal knowledge and characteristics were cited as most important with the highest frequency, followed by content knowledge, then cultural knowledge and finally pedagogical was cited as most important with the lowest frequency. (Refer to Table 3.)

Table 3: Items cited as most importance

	# of times cited as most important	% of respondents
Personal Knowledge & Characteristics	21	48.8%
Content Knowledge	12	27.9%
Cultural Knowledge	5	11.6%
Pedagogical Knowledge	5	11.6%
Total respondents	43	97.7%

In response to question #6 (What would you have benefited from that you didn't receive in your training?), all the respondents (44) answered the question and some respondents offered more than one suggestion (65 comments were collected). 90% of the total responses (59 out of 65 responses) indicated dissatisfaction with the training. Four respondents (6% of the total number of participants) thought that there were no improvements that needed to be made and two (3% of the total number of participants) did not know how the training could be improved. Even though pedagogical knowledge was cited least frequently as the most important in the responses to question #5, 53% of the comments revealed dissatisfaction about the lack of sufficient training in pedagogy; 30% of the comments indicated that more cultural training would have been helpful; 8.4% suggested more disciplinary training; and 4% suggested more English language training. (The specific suggestions to improve the training that participants received can be obtained from the author of the study if requested.)

Discussion

The data collected bring to light some interesting findings. In the review of the literature, it becomes apparent that that good teaching is far more than just a good grasp of content. Rather, it is a combination of personal characteristics or dispositions and other factors. While it is acknowledged that these characteristics are hard to measure, the participants in this study indicated that patience, creativity, flexibility and knowledge about second language acquisition and specifically English as the most important characteristics to possess to be good ESL teachers. Correspondingly, they identified patience, creativity, flexibility and faith as the qualities they relied on the most. Also, the data clearly demonstrated that this group perceived that the possession of personal characteristics was far more important than the possession of pedagogical knowledge. The findings of this study are consistent, in general, with the findings of other studies, which have demonstrated the importance of the possession of personal characteristics for successful teaching.

Implications for teacher training

It is the person of the teacher that is the most important factor in teaching and learning. It should therefore be apparent that teacher

education should focus upon the person of the teacher. This requires primary attention to the feelings, attitudes, and beliefs of the teacher, including all the attitudes, opinions, and beliefs which the teacher holds to be true regarding one's own personal existence: one's self-concept. (Patterson & Purkey, 1993, p. 4)

Thompson, Greer, and Greer (2004) ask a question about the inclusion of personal characteristics at the outset of their study entitled *Highly Qualified for Successful Teaching: Characteristics Every Teacher Should Possess*, "How can universities and teacher educators teach their soon-to-be teachers and those who are already in the field to be tailors of nurturing and caring?" (p. 3). They suggest it can be accomplished by looking, listening and reflecting upon the words of the students themselves. The students they surveyed listed the following twelve personal characteristics of their favourite teachers which all centre around the theme of caring: fairness, having a positive outlook, being prepared, using a personal touch, possessing a sense of humour, possessing creativity, admitting mistakes, being forgiving, respecting students, maintaining high expectations, showing compassion and developing a sense of belonging for students.

The need for pedagogical training to support a teacher's quest for excellence is obvious. Students themselves understand the need for pedagogical training. In addition to the desire to receive more pedagogical training, the participants in this study suggested including more training on how to discipline and manage a classroom (also included in pedagogical training), learning more about cultural differences (cultural knowledge) and learning more about the language they were teaching (content knowledge).

Even though the perception of this group of participants is that the possession of personal characteristics is of paramount importance to successful ESL teaching, they also indicated that their training was insufficient; this revealed that they felt that more comprehensive pedagogical training would have been helpful. It is for this reason that theoretical and practical aspects of teaching are the focus of teacher training programs. However, teacher training needs to incorporate discussions and hypothetical scenarios which demonstrate to prospective teachers the need to possess and utilise the personal characteristics that will be called upon, such as patience, creativity and flexibility. Teacher trainers need to pay attention to the impact of disposition on classroom practice. Weiner and Cohen (2003) assert that if dispositions are viewed from the perspective of self-growth and capacity building to adapt to a changing and complex job, teacher trainers need to help individuals develop deep, more constructive dispositions to teach. They suggest that teacher educators ask effective teachers about what dispositions they believe they possess, write them down and then discuss these characteristics with their students.

Weiner and Cohen (2003, p. 5) also provide examples of questions for teacher educators to use to encourage reflection and mindfulness such as:

- What is the purpose (goal) of this lesson/strategy/assessment tool?
- What are its theoretical underpinnings?
- In what ways does this lesson/strategy/assessment tool/research study fit or conflict with your personal operative theory of learning?
- How effective or significant was the lesson (etc.)? What are the strengths and limitations of the assessment method(s) used to determine effectiveness?

- What alternative methods of instruction or assessment could have been used?
- Why did you or the author select that approach?
- What ethical issues are or could be raised by the purpose, methods or outcomes of the lesson?
- What did you learn about yourself, your students, and/or the teaching/learning process? Consider whether the lesson adequately reflects your own beliefs about the goals of education, learning and teaching, or assessment methods.
- If there was not a good fit between your beliefs and what actually happened, what does that say to you?
- What, if anything, are you likely to do differently in the future?

Commenting on the paucity of research on teacher education, Wilson, et al. (2001) in a report entitled *A Research Report prepared for the U.S. Department Of Education by the Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy* assert that:

... *research* on teacher education is a relatively new field. The development of a sustained line of scholarship that examines the content, character, and impact of teacher education programs only began in the 1960s and gained momentum in the 1980s. In fact, with the exception of a brief period of time when the federal government supported teacher preparation research in the 1970s, there has been very little sustained funding for such research. A related problem concerns the lack of sufficiently rich databases to support high-quality research on teacher preparation. As will become clear, while the field does not lack exhortations about what teacher preparation *should* look like, there is much left to learn. (p. 1)

In this same report, Wilson et al. state that the research does not clearly reveal a link between teacher preparation programs and good teaching and that it is not clear what coursework, fieldwork and experiences make for well-prepared pre-service teachers.

“Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted” (author unknown, taken from a sign hanging in Einstein’s office at Princeton). There are certain variables that contribute to good teaching that cannot be accurately measured or ‘counted’. This is especially true in the case of measuring personal characteristics or dispositions that lead to successful teaching. Disposition impacts teaching; any successful teacher will attest to that. Even though difficult to quantify, teacher education programs must do a great deal more to encourage the development of those characteristics that teachers intuitively know are necessary for good teaching. The perceptions of the teachers in this study add imperative to the need to address this issue early on in teacher training. Pre-service teachers need to be given opportunities in the classroom to demonstrate or evaluate their possession of these characteristics, and intentional efforts must be made to develop and cultivate the dispositions that lead to successful teaching. The perceptions expressed by the teachers and documented in this study cannot and should not be ignored when writing curricula for teacher education programs; students themselves must be encouraged to have open and honest discussions about dispositions and educators need to share their personal experiences. Greater gains can be made in this area by exploring what can be done inside and outside the classroom to cultivate these characteristics in teacher candidates.

The findings of this study cannot be generalised. As already stated, there is a paucity of research on teacher preparation and specifically on the difficult task of identifying and quantifying the personal characteristics that make good teachers. There is also no consensus about the exact nature of dispositions and direct measurement of disposition is difficult. The reliability and validity of the survey used in this study and the data obtained from it remains unknown. Since the sample is small and may not be representative of the larger population of teacher candidates, this particular study might have been better suited for qualitative rather than quantitative analysis. Despite these shortcomings, this study adds to the emerging literature on teacher dispositions and points to the need to further address the identification of dispositions that lead to successful teaching and the perception that personal characteristics are more important than pedagogical training. Even though this study can only be treated as a preliminary study, it will hopefully create an impetus for more in-depth quantitative and qualitative research in this area.

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