

PROFESSIONAL COMPETENCE OF ENGLISH TEACHERS IN INDONESIA: A PROFILE OF EXEMPLARY TEACHERS

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Abstract

This study was conducted to find out the profile of exemplary English teachers at secondary schools. Data were collected through observations, interviews, and questionnaires. The study was conducted in four towns, covering exemplary teachers in one senior high school and three junior high schools. The subjects were exemplary in terms of their active participation in the Teachers' Forum (*MGMP*), and their roles in the professional development of both themselves and their colleagues. This study was done mainly to find out (1) the professional competences of the exemplary teachers in each town and (2) how they achieve the competences. The collected data were analyzed qualitatively by the usual process of sorting, coding, and analyzing. The findings reveal that the subjects in three of the four towns have all the four competences (subject matter, pedagogical, social and personal competences), with the personal competence being the most influential in shaping them as professional and exemplary teachers. From the findings a profile of the professional competences of the exemplary English teachers at secondary schools is developed.

Keywords: professional competence, exemplary teacher, profile.

INTRODUCTION

With the development of English as an international language, schools in Indonesia need more qualified teachers to improve the quality of English subject, and eventually the quality of the schools. Teachers of English have more burdens on their shoulders to improve the students' competence in communication and at the same time enable them to succeed

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in the National Exams. This situation puts them in a dilemma: they have to teach the students and enable them to communicate in English, and at the same time they have to “teach for the test” so that their students will succeed in the National Exams. It is almost impossible to reach both goals with the same level of mastery; either the students are competent in communicating but are not able to answer the multiple choice questions or they can answer the questions easily but are not able to communicate in English. When confronted with this hard choice, what should a good teacher do? Should she sacrifice one goal for the other, or should she make compromises? What actually are the characteristics that make a teacher a good, even an exemplary one? We believe these are questions that are common in many parts of the world; teachers are the people parents and other people turn to when they realize that the young generations of the country need to be better equipped for the competition in their career. Teachers have heavy burdens on their shoulders not only because they have to educate the young of their country to produce better people in certain subject areas, but also because they have the responsibility to teach moral values to their students. Teachers, then, have to be good people, and they have to continuously learn and develop themselves, personally as well as professionally. They should learn from exemplary teachers—those who are exceptionally effective.

Exemplary teachers, then, are those who have professional competences. In discussing teacher competences, four questions must be asked: the “why”, the “what” the “how” and the “who”. The “why” is concerned with the reason why we need to specify teacher competences: what effects we wish the teachers to have on students; what kinds of emotional, intellectual, social and physical growth of students we want the teacher to facilitate.

The “what” of teacher competences cover three areas: knowledge, performance, and impact. The first refers to the question on what a teacher should know in order to be effective in teaching. The second answers the question on what the teacher should be able to do in order to be effective in teaching. The third answers the question on what influence the teacher should have on students’ behavior.

The “who” and the “how” in defining teacher competences refer to the persons and institutions who should be involved in the defining process and look at the sources from which competences might be drawn, such as students, researchers, and other existing programs. Competences must be assessable, and therefore must have certain standards for the assessment purposes.

The Ministry of National Education has developed eight standards for schools, one of which is the standards for teachers which cover four

kinds of competences outlined in the Ministerial Regulation about standards of teachers (Department of National Education, 2007). To a certain extent, this study is inspired by the standards but not intended to verify them; rather, it seeks to create a profile of exemplary English teachers at some secondary schools and find out how the exemplary teachers achieve their competences. Therefore, the profile is developed from the information gathered from the field. To describe the skills, knowledge, abilities and attitudes of competent teachers, we must conduct an empirically-based naturalistic study of professional teachers considered to be competent.

Previous studies investigating teachers' competences have indicated some characteristics of effective teachers but they are not well categorized as teacher competences of exemplary teachers. Johns (2008), for example, lists the characteristics of effective teachers, which include using various methods to involve students and encourage their interactivity, being prepared to "go the extra mile" for an individual, and are themselves good learners. Another researcher, Moore (2008), says that an effective teacher "is passionate about what they do." They love learning, always seek for the latest information, and they attend classes not only to keep certification but also because they are interested in the continuing development in their field. Furthermore, she states that effective teachers are respectful and attentive, and believe that education should be a life-long pursuit. Still other studies have revealed that outstanding teachers have the ability to motivate high academic engagement and competence, are excellent class managers, are able to foster a positive, reinforcing and cooperative environment, and always put their teaching in context (National Research Center on English Learning Achievement, 1998).

This study is, therefore, designed to investigate the professional competences of the exemplary teachers at some secondary schools and how they achieve the competences.

Methods

This study was conducted in four towns: Malang, Sidoarjo, Solok, and Lawang. In each town one exemplary teacher was selected as the subject of the study. As this study is ethnography, the subjects were not selected based on sampling. They were selected based on the researchers' knowledge and experience. The subjects were identified as participants in the trainings and workshops at the national levels. All the subjects were outstanding participants; they were very active in all the sessions, very helpful to other participants, and had very good scores in all the assessments. In each school, the idea of an outstanding teacher was confirmed by asking the principal, colleagues, and students. The first question was about the informants'

opinion of a good English teacher. Based on the informants' answers, another question was asked: who, in their school, they would nominate as the teacher who had the characteristics that they mentioned. All of them mentioned the name of the subjects, which then confirmed the selection of the four subjects: teachers of *SMAN 8 Malang*, *SMPN 1 Sidoarjo*, *SMPN 1 Lawang*, and *SMPN 3 Solok*. They are also President, Vice President of Teachers' Forum (*MGMP*) in their town, regency, province, or active participant in their school *MGMP's (MGMPs)*.

The study is ethnography, in which data are collected by means of observations, interviews, field notes, and questionnaires. The primary method of data collection is observing the subjects both in the classroom and outside. In addition, interviews were conducted with the principal, the students, and the colleagues at the schools where the subjects teach. Some of their colleagues are also requested to fill out questionnaires.

The observations were done both inside the classroom where the subjects taught, and outside, when the subjects were dealing with students, chatting and talking with their colleagues, conducting a meeting, or talking and working with the principal.

The interviews with their principals, colleagues and students were done to find out why they considered the subjects to be exemplary teachers. When the informants confirmed the subjects as the best, or the exemplary teachers, interviews were done with the subjects. The interviews were to find out what they themselves thought about qualities of an exemplary English teacher and what they had done to achieve the status as exemplary teachers.

Results

The study reveals that for most of the informants the most important quality of an exemplary English teacher is their personal competence. Students, colleagues and most of the Principals say that the ideal teacher is the one who can be close to the students, who understands that English is a difficult subject, and therefore she should not be easily angry at them. For students the most important thing is that their teacher is kind, funny, patient, and helpful. She should understand that as English is not their native language, students will have difficulties and the teacher should help them overcome those difficulties.

The next important competence that an ideal English teacher should have is pedagogical competence; she should vary her teaching methods to make the lessons interesting and full of surprises for the students. She

should use various media and sources, and not just stick to the textbook; and she should give interesting, authentic tasks so the students can experience using English for real communication.

Having good relationships with colleagues, Principal and other members of society is also deemed very important for the success of the ideal English teacher. Being kind, helpful, and willing to share knowledge are the characteristics of an ideal colleague stated by teachers of other subject matters as well as other English teachers in the subjects' schools.

The last competence deals with what the teacher should know about her discipline. In the standards developed by The Board for National Standards of Education (*BSNP*) this competence is termed the professional competence. In fact, it is concerned with subject matter competence, and the term "professional competence" should refer to all the professional teachers' competences. This subject matter competence is seen as the most important by the English teachers; as they feel that they are models for their students, they feel they are responsible for providing the best model and exposure for the students. Most of the colleagues and students, however, take the subject matter competence for granted; they believe that the English teachers must have good English competence.

During the observations on one of the subjects in class sessions, the subject (Subject 1) really showed her competence in her subject matter; she used various methods, incorporated IT into her lessons, maintain students' interest in the lesson, and involve all students in the activities. She talked to them in English all the time and thus gave them a lot of exposure to English. It was obvious that the students loved and respected her.

The subject's relationship with her colleagues was very good; they made jokes, teased each other, and talked about their families. The fact that Subject 1 is the vice principal for curriculum affairs does not hinder the other teachers from being close to her. The principal also had a very good relationship with the subject. In the interview, the principal said that Subject 1 was the one he trusted with the preparation for the *RSBI* (International standard pilot-project schools) status; she was the most experienced teacher, the one with the highest TOEFL score, and the one whom the students were closest with.

The interviews with informants (the principal, colleagues, and students) reveal that they were all in agreement that Subject 1 was the ideal English teacher in that school. She fulfills all the requirements that an ideal English teacher should meet.

Subject 2 has very similar characteristics as Subject 1. The principal and colleagues also regarded her as the ideal English teacher in that school. They trusted her with important roles in the school; she has been one of the

mentors for the teachers of Science and Mathematics since the school's upgraded status into *RSBI* in 2007. She is the vice president of the *MGMP* of the Province of East Java and, therefore, she is very often invited to other schools to become an instructor in their trainings and workshops. She is also a very-well liked teacher and colleague, as was obvious during the observations on her activities at school. The students who were interviewed all stated that Subject 2 was an ideal teacher: she made English lessons enjoyable, gave interesting tasks for students to do, and was a very friendly teacher. The colleagues all stated that she was very helpful to other teachers and office staff and had an important role in developing the school, especially in obtaining the *RSBI* status. Students missed her when she had to leave her classes to be involved in her activities outside the school. They wanted her to be present in all sessions, and not leave them so often. Other than that, she is the students' "idol".

During the interview with Subject 2, it was found out that, as the vice president of East Java English Teacher Forum (*MGMP*), she is indeed very busy. She almost every day involves in workshops and meetings in addition to her own teaching responsibilities. She is also a very innovative teacher as indicated by the way she manages *MGMP* activities. While teachers usually use *MGMP* meetings to talk about lesson plans or develop Student Worksheet (*LKS*), Subject 2 organizes her members to talk about new developments in teaching methods, and periodically conducts lesson study-style sessions where one teacher acts as a model teacher and other members are observers in the classroom. According to Subject 2, this activity has brought a lot of benefits for the professional development of the teachers.

Subject 3 is another portrait of an exemplary English teacher. As the president of *MGMP* of her schools area, she is constantly in search of new issues to be discussed in the forum. She wants to develop professionally; and she wants her colleagues to develop with her. After she attends a training or workshop at national levels, she immediately arranges meetings to disseminate the knowledge to the members of her *MGMP* in her area.

The subject's family—her husband and son—really supported her career; they were very proud of her achievements, such as being nominated as the highly achieving teacher (*guru berprestasi*) from West Sumatera province, and being awarded the title "The Best Teacher of the Year 2008" from the Department of National Education, Solok Regency.

In her relationships with her colleagues, students, and principal, the subject shows very good conduct and helpfulness, respect, and friendliness. Her students said that she was a very friendly teacher who always had very interesting activities for them; colleagues admired her and appreciated her

efforts to help them with English, and the principal said she was the most competent English teacher in that school; he really appreciated her kind efforts in helping her colleagues, especially teachers of Science and Mathematics, to prepare the school for obtaining the school's *RSBI* status. Subject 3 is obviously considered an exemplary teacher in the school.

Subject 4 has less competence than the other three subjects; yet, his students adore him and find him a very likeable teacher. He has a sense of humor and always makes them feel that English is not a difficult subject. However, he was not really highly competent in the pedagogical and social competences. He only involved in the school level (*MGMP*), he rarely attended workshops and trainings, and never involved as an instructor in any workshops.

Teachers at his school were of different opinions about Subject 4; some stated that he was indeed the best English teacher in the school, while others did not consider him as the best. According to the principal, he was a very good teacher of English but not really the ideal teacher.

Exemplary teachers achieve their competences by being actively involved in *MGMP*, attending conferences, workshops and in-service trainings, as well as maintaining good relationships with others. All the subjects but Subject 4 have done all of them. Subject 4 is obviously a good teacher but not sufficient to be categorized as exemplary.

In general, exemplary English teachers are those who exhibit and arouse positive feelings in others. They are helpful, patient, interesting, and kind to colleagues and students; they are dependable and trustworthy in the eyes of the principals. Most of all, however, they are teachers who love their profession and enjoy what they are doing.

Discussion

The first subject's outstanding social and personal skills are obvious from the ways people interact with her; students are really close to her, colleagues also relate well with her despite her position as the vice principal for curriculum affairs. The principal is also obviously close to her and trusts her with the *RSBI* program. Her subject matter and pedagogical competences are also obviously high.

Subject 2 also shows outstanding characteristics as an exemplary English teacher. After observing her, both in class and outside, it is obvious that the subject has very good skills in all four aspects, which makes her a popular teacher. It is clear that not only students are close to her but also other teachers and office staff.

Subject 3 has similar characteristics as the other two. She also possesses exemplary skills in all the four competences; she is always eager to develop and wants her colleagues to do the same.

Subject 4, on the other hand, does not have all the qualities that the other three do. He is indeed a dedicated teacher; he clearly wants his students to be competent in English. However, he did not show enough evidence that he was really concerned with pursuing professional development by involving in in-service trainings or attending seminars and workshops. His limited knowledge seems to have hindered him from being actively involved in *MGMP*.

The various standards and descriptions of exemplary teachers are more concerned with cognitive traits of the teachers. However, from the observations and interviews with informants as well as subjects, it is clear that cognitive factors alone are insufficient. An exemplary teacher should also have superior affective characteristics. The studies reported in the papers presented at the TEFLIN conference (Listyani, 2007; Purjayanti, 2007; Sadik, 2007) reveal that students like teachers who have certain affective characteristics such as kind, patient, and loving. Interviews in the present study revealed the same things: exemplary teachers are those who have excellent personal competence; the other competences follow.

Those findings are in line with characteristics of exemplary or excellent teachers put forward by experts. Arends (1998), for example, states that a good teacher has to have four attributes; they are personal qualities, knowledge base, repertoire of teaching strategies, and a disposition towards reflection and problem solving. The first of those, the personal qualities, is elaborated into the ability to relate with students, colleagues, and parents, and to create democratic classrooms. These attributes are very similar to the social competence outlined by *BSNP*, although they are not explained as carefully as the ones in the *BSNP* standard (Ministerial Decree, 2007).

The second attribute, the knowledge base, refers to the knowledge of subject matter, human development, and pedagogy. This attribute correlates with pedagogical competence, together with the next attribute, the repertoire of teaching strategies. Referring again to *BSNP* document, these two attributes are separated into two: subject matter competence (which is termed *professional competence* in the Ministerial Decree No. 16/2007) and pedagogical competence. The fourth attribute, the disposition toward reflection and problem solving, is close to personal competence in *BSNP* standard.

The above descriptions are shared by other experts. Kaplan and Owings (2007), for instance, in talking about quality teachers, distinguish teacher quality from teaching quality. The former refers to what teachers

know and bring to the classroom. They include aptitudes, professional preparation, licensure and certification, as well as prior professional experience. The latter, on the other hand, refers to how teachers make use of what they know to enhance student learning, such as teaching techniques and strategies. According to the Training and Development Agency for Schools in the UK (2011), the highest level teacher—i.e. Advanced Skills Teacher (AST)—is the one who “has to provide models of excellence and innovative teaching, and uses the skills to improve teaching-learning by undertaking and leading school improvement activities and continuous professional development (CPD) for other teachers’ developmental work across a range of workplaces, and uses their experience to improve their own school”.

The three subjects (Subjects 1, 2, and 3) can, therefore, be categorized as Advanced Skills Teachers; they have done what is outlined in the standards. All three are either the president or the vice president of Teachers’ Forum (*MGMP*). They have fulfilled the criteria by conducting continuous professional development for other teachers and being very innovative in their teaching.

The characteristics described above mostly deal with cognitive and pedagogical competences; but from the present study, personal competence is also very important and should be given more emphasis. Following are the elaborations of the profile of professional competence that an exemplary EFL teacher must have.

For an English teacher to be exemplary, she has to have, first of all, a good, if not excellent, competence in the subject matter (i.e. English). This may seem to be taken for granted by many people other than the English teachers themselves. They tend to put a lot of pressure on themselves to excel in the subject matter. Actually this competence is already guaranteed by the requirement that a teacher has to have an S1 or D-IV degree qualification, and as such, it is understandable that other people view subject matter competence as something given by their formal education.

The second competence—personal competence—is apparently the most important of all. A teacher who has the following personal characteristics will have high potential to develop other competences to be an exemplary teacher: First of all, an English teacher has the spirit, eagerness, love and enthusiasm for her subject matter specialty. Those spirit and enthusiasm will permeate to other aspects; she will be a pleasant person, a friendly and helpful teacher (and colleague) who wants her students and other teachers to develop their competence in English. She will have hopes and pride in her teaching profession, a respect for herself and others, and dignity in her day to day duties. With the hopes and pride she will want to

continually develop in her profession; she will always feel that she should improve her competence, and thus she will attend all kinds of in-service trainings, even without the subsidy from the school. She has openness for anything new and advantageous in teaching.

Her love for her teaching career will lead her to always search for better ways and models of teaching, and the best way to assess students' works, to be a better teacher. She will feel truly happy in seeing her students grow in competence, as well as in their life skills; in English as well as in other aspects of life. Her activities in attending seminars and workshops will give her vast input and knowledge on how to tailor her teaching activities and kinds of media to suit the needs of different students in her class. She will also want to help other teachers grow with her, through *MGMP*, or any other training programs held by the schools in her area. She does not want to grow and develop alone, and thus she is satisfied when her colleagues develop professionally as well.

Her understanding of the materials and curriculum will lead her to develop good, detailed syllabuses and lesson plans with measurable indicators and suitable materials which are delivered through applicable techniques and valid assessment. She will train other English teachers to do the same. She does not view the government's changing policies as something negative; rather, she believes that whatever the government has decided must be for the betterment of the education of Indonesian citizens. Based on her belief, she is always ready and willing to learn new methods and techniques and apply them to her class.

Furthermore, her pride in the teaching profession will make her sociable; her relationship with others in the education community will be based on respect for others, not only other teachers and the principal, but also office staff in the school, the school committee, the students, and the parents of her students. She is aware that without those people, the endeavors in helping students grow and become competent human beings will not be successful.

Finally, love, pride, and hopes for the teaching profession will be reflected in the enthusiasm she shows to everyone, in her classroom and outside. She wants her students to love English as she does, want to keep on learning, and find joy and fun in the learning process. With that, she will always strive to find new ways to make her class enjoyable. In turn, students, who feel her enthusiasm, will also be enthusiastic. All these are in line with Adadevoh's statements (2008) that effective teachers are those who "not only have the credentials to teach, but also have a passion for what they do" and that "effective teachers continually spend time and effort to

improve their skills; they are never satisfied and always challenge themselves to get greater achievements”.

CONCLUSIONS

Exemplary teachers' competences, which cover personal, pedagogical, subject matter, and social competences, are indeed outstanding. The four competences outlined by the Board for the National Standards of Education (*BSNP*) and their elaboration are appropriate to be used as the criteria for determining the quality of teachers. Those competences, if all are fulfilled, would lead a teacher to be fully professional. However, it is important to note that the four competences do not have the same weight. This study indicates that the personal competence is the most important, and it will permeate and be reflected in the other competences. The profile of an exemplary English teacher covers the four competences which should be present and reflected in her daily conduct.

One thing stands out from the results of this study that whatever the condition of where they live and teach, the exemplary teachers have one thing in common: they are professional in the real sense of the word. They have very good mastery of English. They have the skills and mastery of the appropriate teaching techniques to be used with different grade levels students. Furthermore, they implement well-planned lessons, use various interesting, contextual media, and apply authentic assessment with their students. They have good relationships with their principals and colleagues and are generally well-liked and well-respected because of their exemplary good conduct, work ethics, commitment and their personality in general. But first and foremost, they have the personal competence that gives them the aspiration and enthusiasm to continuously develop their professionalism.

The exemplary teachers achieved their competences through their participation in various workshops and trainings, not only in the field of English teaching, but also in assessment, Classroom Action Research, and others. Moreover, these exemplary teachers are not people who get satisfied easily; they keep updating their knowledge and mastery of new ways of teaching, and of the English language in general.

Another important thing which supports the development of the competences is the support of the closest people around: spouse, children, as well as colleagues and principals, all play very important roles in the development of the teachers' professionalism. Without the support of those people they would not have reached all the achievement.

Finally, the findings of this study show that the four competences outlined by the *BSNP* are generally in line with the competences of the exemplary teachers.

In general, this study recommends that the four professional competences outlined by the Board for National Standards of Education (*BSNP*) be disseminated more clearly to teachers, principals, school superintendents, as well as to stake holders in the education field. The core-competences and the subject matter competences should be explained to teachers and other people directly or indirectly related to education, particularly the secondary school. Teachers should be made to feel that those standards are realistic; with continuous efforts more and more teachers will be exemplary, and thus the education in Indonesia will continue to improve.

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