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Student views of a Caring Teacher in an Undergraduate English Language Classroom in Russia

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Abstract

The study has sought to find out how undergraduate students in a Russian university perceive caring attributes of their English teachers. Thirty-four students, all enrolled in the first and second year of university studies participated in this research. Open-ended surveys were used to collect the data. Analysis of the responses revealed that on one hand, students see themselves as largely responsible for success in learning English, emphasizing such qualities as study habits and desire to achieve. On the other hand, the results point out to the fact that students clearly understand that having pedagogical and content knowledge is not enough for the teacher to be effective. Students want and need to see a teacher as a caring professional, not simply a vessel of knowledge. However, as the results indicate, there is a disconnect between what students want to see in a teacher in terms of caring characteristics and what they actually see in the classroom, as many of the students surveyed could not illustrate how caring traits they identified as desirable in a university teacher are actually played out in their classrooms.

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1. Introduction

In recent years there has been an increased focus on caring in teaching which is evident in the attention given to this issue in various teacher preparation programs. Most of the focus in studying this issue has been on teacher characteristics, attitudes and beliefs of those who work in elementary and middle level education (see for example, Flores and Smith, 2007; Marlowe et al., 2003). Some focus was also on teacher preparation programs that prepare elementary and secondary schools teachers (Fanelli and Chernobilsky, 2013; Stairs, 2010). Very few

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of these studies focus on post-secondary education and even fewer are interested in finding out what students themselves perceive to be caring teaching.

These perceptions, however, are important to consider as they may be a key factor in the successful learning experience and outcomes. As Gault (2003, 2004) studies indicate, learning what good teaching means to students is important because if teacher's strategies do not meet students' expectations, learning outcomes will not be satisfactory.

One issue that has not been studied in detail is how students who study English to prepare themselves for future careers view their level of preparedness and how these students define caring in teaching. Shono (2005) emphasizes that not only knowledge of English but also personal attributes (e.g., being a respectful professional, being caring and patient) are important when teaching English to non-native English speakers. Thus, for practicing instructors, it might also be useful to know what characteristics of teachers students view as important. To address this gap in the research, the current study sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What do students perceive as important in learning a language?
2. What characteristics these students perceive a teacher should possess in order to be considered a caring teacher?
3. Do undergraduate college students view their English teachers as caring?

The ideas of Nel Noddings (1992) are often central to research on caring. According to Noddings, in order for an action to be considered an act of caring, it is essential for that action to be perceived as caring by the recipient, not just by the giver. Caring is, therefore, only evident when an individual puts aside one's own interests and needs in order to address the needs of the other, who, in turn, responds to the given help. Using these ideas as the framework, the researchers hoped to understand which behaviors and traits of English teachers are perceived as caring by a cohort of undergraduate students in a Russian university.

2. Methodology

2.1 Sample

A total of 34 undergraduate college level students from one of the major Russian Technical University, National Research Tomsk Polytechnic University participated in the study. Among the students, 23 were males and 11 were females. All students were either first or second year students (21 freshman students, and 13 sophomores). All students stated that they have studied English before entering the University, with 18% also stating that they studied English for more than 10 years. Of 34 participants, only 32% (11 students) informed the researchers of their major field of study. Of these 11 students, 5 were social sciences majors and 6 majored in technical fields (e.g., engineering and industrial design). As part of the demographic survey, students rated their own comfort with English in four language domains: writing, speaking, listening and reading. Ninety-one percent of the students self-rated their comfort with English. The results of these ratings appear in Table 1.

Table 1. *Comfort with English language as reported by participants*

	Poor	Adequate	Fair	Good	Excellent	Not reported
Writing	3	10	10	8		3
Speaking	8	13	8	2		3
Listening	6	8	10	7		3
Reading	1	9	6	14	1	3

2.2. Materials

To solicit the information from the students, a short demographic questionnaire and a 15-question open-ended survey were offered to students for consideration (see Appendix A). The surveys were designed by one of the co-authors for the use in another, larger study. The instruments were forwarded to the data collectors in

a university in Russia for dissemination. The demographic questionnaire was used to understand the participants better. The open-ended survey was used to gather information about the questions of interest to the researchers. Since the questionnaire came from a larger study, only certain questions were analyzed for the purposes of this report. Specifically, the analysis focused on Questions 5, 7, and 8 that deal with student self-perceptions as learners and Questions 11 and 13 that inquired into teaching practices that students see in the classroom.

2.3. Procedure

The researchers collected data in the Spring Semester of 2014. To collect the data, one of the co-authors approached her students, who took English class with her and requested their participation in the study. The participation was voluntary. Each student who agreed to participate in the study was informed of the purposes of the study and signed a consent form, which was required by the University in the USA where the study was designed. During the data collection phase, the researcher responsible for the collection of data distributed instruments to participating students for completion. The students had a choice of whether to fill out the questionnaire in Russian or in English. Forty-four percent of the students filled the survey in Russian and 56% (19 students) chose to do that in English.

3. Results and Discussion

To present the results, it is first important to indicate how the data were analyzed. The analyses were similar to the ones that were developed for a previous study (Fanelli and Chernobilsky, 2013).

3.1. Self-reports

Question 5 of the survey sought to find out what was most important for students in learning a language. (The question read as follows: “You have been studying English for some time now. What do you think is the most important for you as an English learner in learning the language?”). Sixteen students (47%) either did not provide an answer or focused their answer on future careers and the importance of learning a language to obtain a job. The rest of the students (53%) listed various ideas they saw as important. All the responses students gave can be broken down into 4 broad categories: forty-five percent of the responses fell into *personal attitudes to learning* category, 7% of the responses indicated *preference to using traditional methods* as important for them, whereas 18% of the responses focused on various *communicative strategies* as important to us. Finally, 5% of the responses focused on *motivation* as an important factor in successful learning.

Although the answers provided are quite diverse, a pattern is evident: a majority of students clearly see their personal attitudes towards learning to be a key in a successful learning process. These responses show that students place the onus of responsibility on themselves and their own study habits, motivation and goals and that is what shapes their success in mastering the language.

Interestingly, when comparing the answers given to Question 5 with the responses provided to Question 7 (What strategies or methods do you find to be the most successful when learning English?), a different picture emerges. About a third of the responses students gave (30.5%) stressed the importance of various *communicative strategies* teachers bring to the classroom as important for their success when learning English. About half of the responses (57.6%) focused on more *traditional approaches* (where 35.6% were about exercises and translations, and 22% were referring to audio-lingual method of learning). The rest of the responses (11.9%) listed *other factors* as important (teacher characteristics or the ability to study by oneself, for example).

Such stark contrast between the two questions could probably be explained by the differences in wording of the two questions: Question 5 focusing on general factors, and Question 7 specifically addressing strategies. Still, the fact that traditional methods of teaching and learning English are still highly valued by the students merits further explorations as to why students find this important.

In addition, it is evident that students clearly interpret the word “strategy” to be tools provided by the teacher, not the tools students employ in learning. While there is a variety of self-directed learning strategies (e.g., using flash cards, highlighting or recording oneself while speaking, among others) are available to the

learners, these strategies are not what they think of when they think of their own learning. Instead, these students heavily rely on teacher-provided classroom tools.

When answering Question 8 (What strategies and methods that your teachers use in the classroom do you find the most successful for you to learn?), many students chose to provide multiple examples of what they see their teachers use successfully in the classroom. That is why a total of 56 responses were recorded. These responses were sorted into two general categories: *Practical Pedagogy* (14 traits, 79.63% of the responses) and *Caring Pedagogy* (5 Traits, 20.37% of the responses). Again, in responses to this question, one can clearly see that students focus more on the methods and practical aspects of teaching, rather than on the caring aspect of good teaching. Just as in responses to Question 7, students again indicate that they rely on the teacher to supply them with tools to master the content.

3.2. Perceptions of teachers

The next question we focused our attention on was Question 11 that read “What qualities do you think a teacher should possess if he or she is to be a caring teacher?” This question was analyzed using the same technique as question 8, i.e. the results were tabulated and then combined into broader categories. More than half of the responses students gave (56%) focused on *general caring qualities* such as compassion, openness and providing a safe environment. Almost 24% of the responses focused on *connectedness to students* (e.g., ability to connect to students or motivate them to learn). Finally, 21% of all the responses focused on such *teacher qualities* as integrity, hard work, tactfulness, and general intelligence, which are generally not connected to the notion of caring.

However, when asked whether students see these qualities illustrated in the classroom (Question 13), only 13 students (38%) were able to articulate that they see some of the aforementioned qualities in their classrooms during instruction. The rest 62% of the students chose not to provide an answer to this question. This is telling, as it is indicative of a clear disconnect between what a student knows to be a good caring teaching and what (s)he experiences in the classroom. Gabillon (2012), drawing on many different studies, points out that “Students may feel frustrated when they see that their beliefs and expectations are not concordant with the classroom methods used. In cases when learner expectations and conceptions of foreign language learning differ from the teacher conceptions and expectations, learning outcomes are postulated to be further affected.” (p. 95).

The answers to questions that deal with teacher caring indicate that students understand that in order to be effective, a teacher must exhibit not only subject matter expertise, not only pedagogical competencies, but also possess “soft” qualities, those hard to measure skills that identify a caring teacher as such.

Discrepancies between what students want from the instructor and what they experience are important to address. Otherwise, not only learning outcomes, but also motivation and self-efficacy can be affected (Peacock, 2001). To avoid such problems, teachers can use various strategies to try to close the gap. For example, teachers can explicitly teach various self-study skills for the students to employ while learning. The teachers can survey the students to find out what students’ preferred learning styles are. Teachers can also ask their students what instructional strategies students would like to see in the classroom more often. Teachers can also show more interest in student life making it a backdrop for classroom discussions and group activities.

To recap, the research questions addressed here can be answered as follows:

Question 1: What do students perceive as important in learning a language?

Students came up with a long list of important attributes for being a successful learner, and students understand that in order for them to achieve their ultimate goals, the responsibility for mastering the content must lie with them.

Question 2: What characteristics these students perceive a teacher should possess in order to be considered a caring teacher?

Students clearly understand that simply being knowledgeable about the content is not enough to make the teaching effective. Teaching is a multifaceted profession that combines many different skills and attitudes, and undergraduate students clearly pick up on that fact. At the same time, student responses indicate that what students perceive as ideal and necessary is not necessarily present in their daily encounters with their instructors.

Question 3: Do undergraduate college students view their English teachers as caring?

While some students do see their instructors as caring teachers who are concerned about student success, largely students were not able to demonstrate this in their response, which provides some food for thought for practicing college level educators as to what they can do, when working with students, to change such negative perceptions.

In conclusion, if instructors are to provide effective instruction to students, it is important for them to know what students think of their own ability and readiness to learn and what they expect to get from their instructors to ensure success. The current research should help teachers understand what students are looking for when learning a foreign language and adjust their expectations and instructional strategies to ensure students success in learning. As Amini & Amini (2012) point out, open teacher-student interaction, where attitudes, expectations and goals are clearly discussed and shared is a central issue in a successful learning process.

Appendix A. Demographic Questionnaire and a survey

Name: _____

Mark the slot that indicates your age: _____ 17-19 _____ 20-22 _____ 23-25

_____ 26-28 _____ Older than 28

Gender: _____ Male _____ Female

Year in the University: _____ First _____ Second _____ Third

_____ Fourth _____ Graduate student

Please write down your major: _____

How many semesters of English did you have (not including the current one) _____

Please assess your English knowledge:

Writing _____ Poor _____ Adequate _____ Fair _____ Good _____ Excellent

Speaking _____ Poor _____ Adequate _____ Fair _____ Good _____ Excellent

Listening, _____ Poor _____ Adequate _____ Fair _____ Good _____ Excellent

Reading _____ Poor _____ Adequate _____ Fair _____ Good _____ Excellent

Survey questions:

1. What is your name?
2. How long have you studied at the University?
3. How many years (semesters) of English study did you have?
4. Why did you choose to study English?
5. You have been studying English for some time now. What do you think is the most important for you as an English learner in learning the language?
6. Can you describe yourself as an English learner?
7. What strategies or methods do you find the most successful when learning English?
8. What strategies and methods that your teachers use in the classroom do you find the most successful for you to learn?
9. What activities do you find the most useful in the classroom for improving your English skills?
10. In the United States, many teachers and administrators are concerned with “caring teaching”. How do you understand this phrase?
11. What qualities do you think a teacher should possess if he or she is to be a caring teacher?
12. Do you think the teachers who teach you English can be thought of as caring?
13. In what ways do you see that in the classroom? Can you give examples without giving names?
14. What do you think an ideal English Language teacher would do in the classroom to help students learn the language?
15. What methods and strategies should a caring teacher think about when he or she is planning lessons for the English language learners?

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