What Makes a Good Language Teacher in a Changing World?

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Abstract

The quality of students' teachers can have a major impact on their lives during and after students' formal education. This article proposes nine areas for teacher improvement toward the goal of being good teachers. These areas for possible improvement include: (a) language proficiency, (b) pedagogical knowledge and skills, (c) understanding of their students, (d) balance of implicit and explicit teaching, (e) membership in communities of teachers, (f) participation in lifelong learning, (g) use of technology, (h) promotion of student engagement and (i) safeguarding of their own health.

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Introduction

A good teacher can make a big difference in a student's life. Research shows that teacher quality matters more than other school-related factors such as school leadership, school locality and amount of learning resources (Goldhaber, 2016). The effect of teacher quality is particularly pronounced for the less advantaged students, i.e., those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. This makes sense as a good teacher is more adept at using their deep professional knowledge and skills to guide their less able students during the learning process. In the context of language learning, for example, the good teacher would choose just-right teaching materials that meet not only students' linguistic needs, but also their affective, cognitive and social needs. The teacher would also use teaching strategies that would enable the students to engage in meaningful learning, the kind of learning characterized by the eager participation of students in the construction of new knowledge and consolidation of previously acquired knowledge.

This article presents some of the most important qualities of a good language teacher drawn from the well-established literature on the topic (Griffith & Tajeddin, 2020) and also from the authors' decades of teaching experience in different parts of Asia. The qualities discussed in the following sections, we believe, can contribute to a language teachers' ability to support language learning in diverse language teaching contexts and for diverse student populations.

Good Language Teachers are Competent Users of the Target Language.

The relationship between language proficiency and effective teaching is fairly well established. Compared to those with a lower level of proficiency in the target language, more proficient language teachers have been shown to be more capable of providing rich language input, serving as a good model of language use, giving more accurate and appropriate feedback to students, providing more effective responses to student questions and using the target language to deliver lessons (Sadhegi, Richards, & Ghaderi, 2020). Moreover, higher proficiency language teachers are more able to improvise

when their lesson does not go as was originally planned. They can quickly make adjustment midway in the lesson in order to keep the students engaged (Richards et al., 2013).

The relationship between proficiency and effective teaching, however, is not linear. If it were, the main goal of language teacher education programs would simply be to improve the language proficiency of the trainee teachers. There is a whole host of other factors that affect teaching quality (see sections below). That being said, there is well-established evidence however showing that language teachers need to achieve a certain level of proficiency, below which their ability to teach effectively may be negatively affected. There is agreement among language scholars and practitioners that a proficiency level in the B2 and C1 range on CEFR would be needed for effective teaching (Renandya et al., 2019).

Fortunately, as the saying goes, "Those who teach learn twice." Thus, teaching provides a wonderful vehicle for teachers to improve their own language proficiency. Furthermore, online, print and other resources can compensate for teachers' temporary weaknesses, at the same time, providing comprehensible input to fuel teachers' own language acquisition. Last but not least, as language teaching pivots to more of a translanguaging approach (Vogel & Garcia, 2017), proficiency in the target language is no longer the only form of language proficiency that matters.

Good Language Teachers Possess Strong Pedagogical Knowledge and Skills.

As was alluded to in the previous section, target language proficiency alone is not enough for effective teaching. Good teachers need to have a deep understanding of the subject matter (e.g., the nature of language) and the pedagogy (the nature of language learning) so that they can teach it in the most effective and efficient manner. For example, knowledge about the grammar of the language and how it is used in a variety of texts and contexts is important. More important than that is how the teacher goes about deciding what language skills (e.g., conversation repair strategies), grammar

and vocabulary points to focus on, why these need to be taught with what degree of intensity and at which stage of language learning.

Effective language teachers, for example, use a wide range of teaching methods to cater to the different needs of their students. Richards and Reppen (2014) suggested that grammar can be taught deductively or inductively (or via a blended approach) depending on the type of grammatical points we are teaching and whether we are teaching younger or older students. While it is not easy to say which methods work better for which groups of students, we believe that inductive teaching of grammar is more in sync with current research and theory in education as this approach allows students to be more cognitively and socially engaged as they explore the form and functions of the grammar and vocabulary points in question in collaborative learning contexts.

Good Language Teachers Have Deep Understanding of their Students.

Teaching and learning are two different things. Many of us used to believe that what we taught was what our students learned. We now know that students don't always learn what we want them to learn. Indeed, students often learn very little from our lessons. One of the reasons is that perhaps we pitch our lesson a bit too high and use teaching materials the content of which lies far afield from students' background knowledge, thus making it difficult for them to make use of their prior experiences to make meaningful connections.

Good teachers understand effective teaching is possible when they know their students' linguistic, affective, cognitive and social needs (Griffith & Tajeddin, 2020). Armed with this understanding, good teachers can design and deliver their lessons in ways that meet the needs of their diverse student population. They will, for example, use just-right language to explain language concepts (Richards, 2017), choose teaching materials that are affectively and cognitively appealing (Tomlinson, 2012), engage students in tasks that spark their curiosity and motivation (Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020; Renandya, 2014), employ socially and culturally sensitive language

teaching methodology (Mckay, 2000) and assess learning using multiple assessment procedures that deepen and extend learning (Mclaughlin, 2012). In the context of teaching reading, teachers with deep knowledge of their subject matter and their students might be in a better position to provide more individualized attention and support to their students. In other words, they might just be able to give the right amount of support, at the right time and to the right students, i.e., those who need it the most (Willingham, 2015). The ability to provide this highly customized support is a much-needed skill today as we strive to make language learning more inclusive by addressing the needs of our student population who come from diverse social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds.

Education should become a level playing field for each and every student, regardless of their racial, social, economic, and cultural backgrounds, where they are given an equal chance of success. To quote Terry Heick, Founder & Director of TeachThought (an education website dedicated to improving life through learning innovation) “Life is not fair, but education should be” (Heick, n.d.). Good language teachers, and all teachers for that matter, should continue to find ways to help every single child to flourish and become the best that they can be despite their initial differences.

Good Language Teachers Use a Balanced Approach to Language Teaching.

One controversial issue in language education is the question of whether language should be taught as knowledge or as ability (Richards & Reppen, 2014). When language is viewed as knowledge, the focus of instruction is often on the systematic and explicit teaching of language forms (e.g., vocabulary and grammar). Language teachers spend a substantial amount of instructional time on teaching various grammar rules and conventions to help students produce correct sentences. The belief here is that when students have learned these grammatical rules, they will be able to produce the language in authentic situations.

According to Ellis (2003, as cited in Richards & Reppen, 2014, p. 6), the following instructional procedures are often used by teachers who teach language as knowledge.

- A specific grammatical feature is isolated for focused attention.
- The learners are required to produce sentences containing the targeted feature.
- The learners are provided with opportunities for repetition of the targeted feature.
- There is an expectancy that the learners will perform the grammatical feature correctly; therefore practice activities are success-oriented.
- The learners receive feedback on whether their performance of the grammatical structure is correct or not. This feedback may be immediate or delayed.

When viewed as ability, language rules are not taught explicitly. Rather, learners are provided with a massive amount of language input from which they implicitly acquire and internalize grammatical rules and other language features. The view that language can be acquired implicitly without too much explicit instruction is supported by insights from decades of research into the nature of language learning. Loewen (2014), summarizing key findings from second language acquisition research, wrote “The ability to produce language relatively easily for communicative purposes draws heavily on implicit knowledge (p. 25)”.

One approach that has received a lot of attention in the professional ELT literature and is widely acknowledged as beneficial for developing implicit language knowledge is extensive reading (Day & Bamford 1998; Nation & Waring, 2019; Renandya & Day, 2020). Extensive reading can be defined as an approach to language learning in which students are encouraged to read a large amount of highly interesting and easy-to-understand reading materials. When students read regularly, they will have numerous opportunities to encounter pragmatically meaningful language features in a variety of communicative contexts. After a year or so of frequent encounters, these language features become internalized and integrated into

students' developing linguistic system, gradually enabling them to retrieve these language features with ease when the opportunities to use them in a communicative setting arise (for further discussion, see Renandya, 2013).
Does this mean that language teachers should focus entirely on developing students' implicit knowledge by providing students with meaningful language input? Probably not. Careful reading of the professional literature coupled with our own experience as language educators point to the importance of using a balanced approach to language learning (see Ellis, 2014; Nation, 2007). Implicit knowledge is indeed important and should perhaps be used to help students build the initial foundation of language learning, allowing them to experience the joy of language learning and at the same time helping them acquire a large number of formulaic language patterns. However, explicit teaching of language features, especially non-salient language features (e.g., subject-verb agreement, non-count nouns, and verb forms) is important too. Focused instruction of these language features using a form-focused teaching methodology (e.g., task-based language teaching) can help students improve on the accuracy of their language production.

Good Language Teachers Belong to Professional Learning Communities.

Learning is both individual and social, as is teaching. In individual learning, we make use of our internal cognitive and affective resources to acquire new knowledge. In social learning, we learn with and from other people who happen to have the same interest as we do. As we interact with others, we get an opportunity to reflect, rethink, revise and refine our understanding of certain language teaching issues, thus helping us to expand and deepen our knowledge. As much as we can learn from others, others too can learn from our unique language teaching experience, which can be the basis for them to extend their learning. While both individual and social learning are useful, a growing number of scholars believe that social learning plays a more important role in one's learning journey and professional development (Jacobs & Renandya, 2019; Johnson & Johnson, 2009).

Professional learning communities, also known as collaborative learning groups, teacher learning circles, critical friends' groups and lesson study groups, refer to communities of dedicated and committed professionals who meet regularly to share professional experiences and to learn from each other (The Glossary of Education Reform, n.d.). Good language teachers believe that by joining a professional learning community, they can critically reflect on their practices in a collaborative environment and evaluate what has worked well and what has not worked well so they can refine and improve their pedagogical practices, which in turn will improve their students' academic and life achievement (Anderson, 2018).

Good Language Teachers are Life-Long Learners.

We now live in a world characterized by frequent and rapid changes. As the world changes, we too need to continue to learn new knowledge and skills, or we may run the risk of being out of sync with new trends in education and society generally. One recent trend in education, including language education, points to the need for teachers to use a more learner-centric approach, one that "seeks to facilitate a more active and more powerful role for students in their own present and future learning" (Jacobs & Renandya, in press). In this approach, the teacher is no longer the central figure whose job is to transmit knowledge to their students. Instead, the teacher's job is to enable students to actively construct or co-construct knowledge in collaboration with their peers and with support from their teacher.

In addition to learning new knowledge and skills, we also need to be willing to relearn and unlearn some of our long-held beliefs about language learning and teaching which might have worked well in the past but may now be considered insufficient. For example, the belief that a monolingual approach to second language learning (i.e., teachers must use only the target language when teaching) was the best way to learn a new language is now considered questionable. ELT experts now believe that students learn best when they are allowed to utilize the full repertoire of their linguistic resources when learning a new language (Tupas & Renandya, 2021). Thus, teachers are now encouraged to use a multilingual or plurilingual approach in the language

classroom, allowing students to make use of their previously learned local languages (e.g., Chinese, Thai, and Vietnamese) as a basis for learning a new language (e.g., English).

Good Language Teachers Use Technology to Enhance Language Learning.

Technology has now become a common feature in education. Educators use digital technology to plan and deliver their lessons, assign homework to reinforce learning, and also monitor and assess learning outcomes (Kessler, 2018). Language teachers too now use technology to teach and engage their students in the language classroom, whether it be a physical classroom or a virtual one. It is important to note that while technology can be used to support and facilitate student learning in general, language teachers should ultimately be concerned with addressing the question of whether and to what extent technology can be used optimally to improve students' language proficiency. Good language teachers, therefore, are always on the lookout for technological tools that can help them apply key language acquisition principles in the most effective manner (see Elis, 2014 for discussions on principles of instructed language acquisition). Their choice of apps is often guided by the following questions:

- Do the apps provide students with rich, interesting and meaningful language input?
- Do the apps promote noticing of important but non-salient target language features?
- Do the apps provide students with frequent and meaningful practice of previously learned language?
- Do the apps promote multimodal processing of target language materials?
- Do the apps promote language learning-focused collaboration?
- Do the apps create greater awareness of the social purposes of language use?
- Do the apps provide exposure to a wider range of language varieties (e.g., Englishes spoken in China, Korea, Singapore and the Philippines?

Thus, good language teachers do not use technology because it is fashionable or because it is mandated by the school and the ministry of education. Rather its adoption is based on the belief that technology can and should be used to enhance the quality and outcomes of students' language learning efforts (Kessler, 2018).

Good Language Teachers Know How to Engage their Students.

The past 75 years or so have witnessed paradigmatic changes in the way we view teaching and learning. These changes have shaped the way we teach our students and support their learning. We outline below some of the most distinct eras that we can glean from the language education literature (Alexander & Fox, 2004; Mercer & Dörnyei, 2020).

- **The era of conditioned learning**. One of the key figures during this era was B.F. Skinner who famously said "Give me a child and I'll shape him into anything". Early methods of language learning such as memorization, extrinsic rewards, repeated drills and practice characterized this era (Alexamder & Fox, 2004).
- **The era of natural learning**. Two key figures here were Noam Chomsky and Stephen Krashen who believed that humans were endowed with an in-born capacity to acquire language. Given a sufficiently rich linguistic environment, language learning will happen smoothly and naturally (Krashen & Terrell, 1983).
- **The era of machine learning**. John Anderson was perhaps the most well-known figure associated with a theory of learning based on how computers process information (Anderson, 1996). The three steps of processing, i.e., encoding, storage, and retrieval became popular during this time, with researchers investigating how we can help learning by teaching students to encode, store and retrieve information more effectively.
- **The era of socio-cultural learning**. The key figure here is Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, who claimed that learning is socially and culturally situated and that learning happens when students receive the right kind of support from others (Vygotsky, 2007). The term ZPD became the buzzword during this time;

students were thought to learn best within their ZPD in the presence of their peers and nurturing teachers. Another key construct in this era is constructivism. Students learn best when they can utilize their pre-existing knowledge to make sense of what they are about the learn.

- **The era of engaged learning**. This is the era that we find ourselves in right now. Engagement, as Mercer (2019) pointed out recently, is the key to optimal and deep learning (or to use her words, "the holy grail of learning"). Learning happens optimally when students are holistically engaged, i.e., when they are kinaesthetically, emotionally, cognitively, and socially engaged.

Have we been seeing language classrooms where students are fully engaged? Probably not. Antonetti & Garver (2015) who visited and observed thousands of classrooms in the United States claimed that while most students were *on task* during learning, only a small number of students were actually *engaged*.

According to them, one of the key differences between students who are on task and engaged is that, unlike the latter, the former completes a classroom task diligently without really understanding the reason why they are doing what they are doing. Those who are genuinely engaged in the task, on the other hand, have a clear idea of why they are doing the task and understand the success criteria for completing it. Because of this, engaged learners are more fully invested during lessons, making use of their mental resources to get the work done.

Good language teachers, we believe, are more likely to do their utmost to engage in the language lessons. They are more likely to use student-centered pedagogy (e.g., choice-based learning pedagogy, differentiated instruction and inquiry or problem-based learning) to fully engage their students.

Good Teachers Take Care of their Own Health.

Teachers face lots of stressors. On one hand, we are surrounded by other people, our students, for much of the day. On the other hand, ours can be a lonely profession, because status hierarchies separate us from our students. We face the stress of accountability from school administrators, students, parents, the wider community, and other stakeholders, not to mention our own expectations. When we have time between classes to rest and destress, we are often greeted by urgent requests from students anxiously seeking our assistance. How can we say, "No"? While most professionals spend much of their day sitting at a desk in a quiet office, most of us teachers spend much of our time standing in not so quiet settings. After school, we do have a chance to sit down, but we are accompanied by the stress of mountains of physical or virtual marking and lesson preparation. Teacher burnout, therefore, is not uncommon in our profession (Küçükoğlu, 2014).

How can we teachers find time to look after ourselves, to temporarily escape from this stress? After all, unhealthy teachers cannot be good teachers, at least not for long. Here are a few suggestions. One problem teachers face is permanently damaged throats from talking so much to rooms full of students. One of us once attended a course by the Singapore Ministry of Education designed to address this sorely (pun intended) needed matter. The instructor's suggestions included:

- Use a microphone.
- Drink lots of water, and visit every toilet you pass. At every class session, he drank a liter of water.
- Use collaborative learning. Of course, the main research-supported benefit of such methodology lies in enhancing student learning. However, at the same time, we rest our voices. As the Singapore Ministry of Education says, we teach less so that students can learn more. After all, students are supposed to be the active ones, while we are (quiet) guides on the side.

Maybe the best advice for protecting teachers' health is to carve out "me time", i.e., time when we work on our own health (physical and mental).

Working on our health could have many different meanings. It could mean exercising, praying, singing, dancing, playing sports, reading/writing poetry, playing with our children, talking to our older family members, taking walks, or doing nothing. Does that seem selfish? Maybe we should see "me time" as our way of carrying out a promise to our current and future students that we will be a good teacher for them for as long as we can.

Conclusion

Teaching, indeed all of life, is about development. When George was hired for his first teaching job, his supervisor told him, "I don't like to hire new teachers, because new teachers are bad teachers; but if these new teachers never get a chance to get better, how can our profession get more good teachers." So, she hired George, and while he was a kind and well-intentioned teacher, despite his university education, he was not a good teacher. About 40 years later, George likes to think he is a decent teacher, but at the same time, he is always learning more, including from Willy, in hopes of getting better.

The purpose of this article has been to supply you, dear readers, with ideas about how you can join Willy and George on their ongoing quest to become better teachers and maybe even better people. Maybe the two quests for improvement can go together, but that discussion is for another article. For now, let us conclude by thanking you for reading this article and by expressing the hope that this article has stimulated some thoughts that you can implement and share with your colleagues about how you and our community of language teachers can better serve our students and society generally.

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