Personality or Pedagogy: Which personal characteristics are important for ESL teachers to possess and what role do they play compared to formal pedagogical training in ESL according to experienced ESL teachers? (Part 2)

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Abstract

When asked to identify which characteristics are important for ESL teachers to possess, experienced ESL teachers answered differently than untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers. Also, the opinions as to whether the possession of these personal characteristics is more important than formal pedagogical training differ between these two groups. When asked which personal qualities they relied on the most during their ESL teaching experience, untrained and/or inexperienced teachers cited the following personal qualities as the three most important to possess: patience, creativity, and flexibility in descending order. However, experienced ESL teachers cited teaching ability, positive attitude and cultural understanding as the three most important personal characteristics to possess. When untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers were asked to rank four categories of knowledge in order of importance, they cited personal knowledge/characteristics as most important, followed by content knowledge, then cultural knowledge, and lastly, pedagogical knowledge. In contrast, experienced ESL teachers indicated just the opposite: pedagogical knowledge was cited as the most important category of knowledge, followed by content knowledge and cultural knowledge (same ranking) and last, personal knowledge. While the first part of this study concluded that teacher educators cannot ignore the perceptions of untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers and this needs to be addressed in teacher training, this second part of the study suggests that it may also be advisable to alert the untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers of the findings of this research, which indicate that these perceptions change with experience.

Keywords: higher education; teacher training; ESL teaching

Personality or Pedagogy?

Researchers have long been discussing the issue of what makes a good teacher. Mark Wasicsko, the Dean of Education and Human Services at Northern Kentucky University asserts that 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. He adds that it is human qualities which students remember about their favourite teachers: " … when trying to improve the quality of learning in kids, attempts by legislators, government and school boards tend to focus on the content knowledge and skills of teachers, and technology and strategies. But all of people's recollections and all the best qualitative research indicate it's actually the human qualities that make the impact" (Wasickso, NKU Web site). He goes on to say (2002), however, that dispositions are not available for direct measurement.

While measurement and identification of these characteristics has been problematic, there is no dearth of opinions on this topic. In fact, there are many Web sites and blogs dedicated to this very question and teachers have many opinions as to which characteristics play the greatest role in successful teaching. A blog site entitled *Ripples of Improvement* lists confidence, patience, compassion, understanding, flexibility, dedication, support, helpfulness, pride and passion as the ten qualities of a good teacher (Ripples of Improvement, 2010). Teacher input is solicited on this topic. A Web site entitled *School-Teacher-Student-Motivation-Resources-Courses.com* includes empathy, positive mental attitude, willingness to be a role model, creativity, sense of humour, presentation skills, calmness, among other characteristics as the necessary qualities of a good teacher (School-teacher-student-motivation-resources-courses.com, 2010). Spitzer (2009) in carrying out the first part of this study found patience, creativity and flexibility to be the three most important characteristics identified by inexperienced teachers.

Teacher educators understand the need for pre-service teachers to possess certain characteristics to be able to carry out the responsibilities they have to their students, which today extend far beyond the classroom. In addition to classroom duties, according to Marchbanks (2000), twenty-first century teachers 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).

All the characteristics cited as being important for good teaching are similar in that they point to humanistic qualities rather than academic knowledge. Maslow and Rogers have added much to the understanding of the humanistic needs of learners and need for teachers to develop an empathetic understanding of their students in order to respond to them sensitively. While Maslow (1971) emphasised the need for teachers to treat their students with unconditional positive regard and provide them with the psychological freedom to exercise their creativity and realise their potential, Rogers (1983) suggested that teachers need to cultivate a trusting environment for successful learning to occur. In order for an individual to create a trusting environment and to establish a personal relationship with the student in order to earn this trust, it is necessary for a teacher to possess certain qualities that will enable this relationship.

In earlier research, Rogers (1969), 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).

So, while there is no definitive consensus as to which personal qualities are more important than others, the literature points out that that personal characteristics are:

- difficult to identify (Wasicsko, NKU Web site)

- difficult to measure (Wasicsko, 2002)

- humanistic in nature (Rogers, 1969, 1983; Waslow, 1971)

The first part of this study (Spitzer, 2009) examined the perceived importance of personal characteristics, and the following traits were listed by untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers in descending order of importance:

1. patience

2. creativity

3. flexibility

In this study, using the same research design as the first study, the following traits were listed by experienced ESL teachers in this descending order of importance:

4. teaching ability

5. positive attitude

6. cultural understanding

Spitzer (2009) also observed that when untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers were asked to rank four categories of knowledge in order of importance, they cited personal knowledge/ characteristics as most important followed by content knowledge, then cultural knowledge, and cited as the least important was pedagogical knowledge. In contrast, in this study using the same research design, experienced ESL teachers indicated just the opposite: pedagogical knowledge was the most important, followed by content knowledge and cultural knowledge (same ranking) and lastly, personal knowledge.

While it is interesting to note the emphasis that researchers have put on the importance of possessing certain personal characteristics for successful teaching, it is worth noting that this study found that after untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers finished their training and began teaching, the perception of the importance of pedagogical training changed. It appears that the importance placed on the possession of personal characteristics necessary for successful ESL teaching changes and moves toward the acknowledgement of the need and importance of good pedagogical training as teachers gain experience. Spitzer (2009) concluded that 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. This current study not only affirms that need, it also suggests that pre-service teachers should be

alerted to the fact that that pedagogical training may become more important to good teaching than personal characteristics as the teacher gains experience.

When I reflect back on my own feelings about my preparedness to be an effective teacher, I remember feeling as though I was well suited for teaching. By well suited, I mean that I believe I had "what it takes" to be a good teacher. I was a bright, positive and caring person and I liked children. I would have grudgingly admitted that academic knowledge was important; but if someone had asked me at the beginning of my teaching career which I thought was more important, personal characteristics (being *"well suited"*) or teacher preparation, I would have responded candidly that I thought personal characteristics were more important for success as a teacher.

Now, however, if asked the same question, I would be hard-pressed to make the same assertion. My years of experience in teaching have given me a more balanced outlook; I would find it difficult to rank the four areas of knowledge, placing more importance on one than the other. I do acknowledge than at the beginning of my career, I would have responded that personal characteristics were far more important than the other areas of knowledge. However, my own perception of the importance of pedagogical training has changed and this study shows that I am not alone in this change of perception.

The Research Design

My interest in this issue was prompted by an opportunity my daughter recently had to teach English as a Second Language (ESL) in Asia. The first part of this study was published in *SLEID* (Spitzer, November 2009) and in that study, I explored the impressions of young individuals who had just returned from a short term teaching assignment in Asia. The majority (55%) were untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers. Their responses to a survey indicated that they believed that the possession of certain personal characteristics was important to successful teaching and the possession of these characteristics was more important than formal pedagogical training. After I completed that study, I decided that it would be interesting to compare the impressions of this group of mostly untrained/ inexperienced teachers with certified teachers who had completed pedagogical training and were teaching with state teaching certifications (i.e., trained/experienced teachers).

This research study presents data collected from teachers who have received state teaching licenses and are currently teaching in public schools in the United States. As an ESL teacher educator in a state (public) college, I contacted teachers I knew personally and asked them to complete a survey and to distribute surveys to teachers in their schools. A paper survey was given only to teachers who gave a verbal affirmation that they would complete the survey. Of approximately 50 surveys distributed, 41 were completed and analysed. I owe the high response rate to the personal relationship I have with many of the respondents. They were given no information about the results of the first study and only told that I was interested in their perceptions regarding the questions in the survey. I offered to share the results of this study with them. I received approval for the study and the survey from the internal review board of my institution that regulates research studies carried out by faculty members.

The Survey

(The complete survey can be found in Appendix A.)

Analysis

Following the procedures suggested by Archer (2007), the survey data were calculated by dividing the total number of the same responses by the total number of responses for each question 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 and presented in tables.

Question #1: What is your initial area of certification?

In response to question #1, many of the respondents listed more than one certification. I originally formulated the question to ascertain in what field the respondents had received the emphasis of their training, but since many recorded their multiple certifications, I tabulated all the data collected (therefore, there are more than 41 responses to this question and the totals are higher than 100%). I did not feel that that their multiple responses would bias the data since I was interested in learning about the area(s) of their training. Table 1 presents the data collected from the respondents indicating training in the following academic areas: Elementary Education (49%), English as a Second Language (24%), followed by Bilingual Education (17%), Spanish (15%), Secondary Education (5%), English (5%), Social Studies (5%), World Languages (5%), and the remaining areas each received 2% of the responses: Early Childhood Education, Psychology, Language Arts/Literacy, Reading, and French. (See results in Table 1.)

Table 1: *Areas of teaching certification*

ACADEMIC AREA	Times Cited	% Of Respondents
Elementary Education	20	49%
English as a Second Language	10	24%
Bilingual Education	7	17%
Spanish	6	15%
Secondary Education	2	5%
World Languages	2	5%
English	2	5%
Social Studies	2	5%
French	1	2%
Reading	1	2%
Early Childhood Education	1	2%
Psychology	1	2%
Language Arts/Literacy	1	2%

Question #2: How many years have you been teaching ESL or bilingual education?

My intention in asking question #2 was to see how many years of experience the respondents had specifically teaching ESL and/or bilingual education. I received 37 responses and compiled the data to get percentages in the following categories: 17

individuals or 46% of the respondents have been teaching 1-5 years, 10 individuals or 27% have been teaching 6-10 years, 4 individuals or 11% have been teaching 11-15 years, and 6 individuals or 16% have been teaching more than 16 years. The average years of teaching experience of all the respondents to this question is 8.14 years.

Question #3: Please rank the following qualities in order of importance using a scale of 1 (most important) to 10 (least important).

The data extrapolated from the responses to question #3 indicated that teaching ability was cited as the most important quality 34% of the time, positive attitude 20% of the time, cultural understanding 17% of the time, compassion 15% of the time, patience 12% of the time, creativity, faith and love (each) 10% of the time, humour, perseverance and friendliness (each) 7% of the time, and collaboration, flexibility and energy (each) 5% of the time. I chose to offer these specific 14 qualities because these were the top 14 qualities respondents of the first part of the study identified as important, and I wanted to use them for comparison purposes. Since I was only interested in the first ten ranked qualities, I instructed the respondents to rank only ten of the fourteen qualities offered. For this question, there were also more than 41 responses; respondents must have misinterpreted the direction to rank 10 qualities of 14 given in order of importance and some rated more than 10 and some fewer. (See results in Table 2.)

Table 2: *Qualities rated in order of importance by experienced teachers*

QUALITIES	Times Cited	% Of Respondents	Rank
teaching ability	14	34%	1
positive attitude	8	20%	2
cultural understanding	7	17%	3
compassion	6	15%	4
patience	5	12%	5
creativity	4	10%	tie 6
faith	4	10%	tie 6
love	4	10%	tie 6
humour	3	7%	tie 7
perseverance	3	7%	tie 7
friendliness	3	7%	tie 7
collaboration	2	5%	tie 8
flexibility	2	5%	tie 8
energy	2	5%	tie 8

Question #4: 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)

- -Cultural knowledge (i.e., understanding of cultural context and characteristics of learners in that culture)

The data from question #4 indicate that when the all the experienced teachers who responded to this question were asked to rank the four items in order of importance, 34% of the respondents ranked pedagogical knowledge as most important, 24% ranked content knowledge and cultural knowledge as #2 (tie) in order of importance, and 17% ranked personal knowledge as least important of the four categories in order of importance. (There was not the same number of answers for each item ranked because some respondents gave 2 items the same rank and some did not rank all of the items.) (Refer to Table 3.)

It is also interesting to note that when the responses of experienced teachers were further broken down into those who are more experienced (more than 5 years of teaching experience) and less experienced (less than 5 years of teaching experience), the results showed that 38% of the teachers with less than 5 years of experience still ranked pedagogical knowledge as most important, 25% ranked both personal knowledge and cultural knowledge tied at #2, and 13% ranked content knowledge as least important. (Refer to Table 5.)

Table 3: *Categories of Knowledge ranked in order of importance by experienced teachers*

CATEGORY	# of times cited as most important	% of respondents	Rank in order of importance
Pedagogical Knowledge	14	34%	1
Content Knowledge	10	24%	tie 2
Cultural Knowledge	10	24%	tie 2
Personal Knowledge & Characteristics	7	17%	3

Discussion

The data collected bring to light some interesting findings. Research has shown us that good teaching is more than academic knowledge. It demands certain personal characteristics. In this study (part 2), experienced teachers report that teaching ability (#1), positive attitude (#2), and cultural understanding (#3) are the top three most important qualities. Part 1 of this study (Spitzer, 2009) has shown that untrained/inexperienced teachers reported that the top three important qualities are

patience (#1), creativity (#2), and flexibility (#3). In this study (part 2), patience was ranked as #5, creativity as #6 and flexibility as #8 by experienced teachers. In the first part of the study (Spitzer, 2009) with untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers, teaching ability ranked as #7, tied with positive attitude, and cultural understanding ranked as #6. This is an interesting finding in that it suggests that as teachers gain more experience, they view teaching ability and cultural understanding as more important than do untrained/inexperienced teachers. Since their teacher training directly affects both teaching ability and cultural understanding, this is another confirmation that pedagogical knowledge becomes more important as teachers gain experience. (See Table 4 for a comparison of important qualities.)

Table 4: *Comparison of Important Qualities*

QUALITY	Rank By Group 1	Rank By Group 2
patience	1	5
creativity	2	tie 6
flexibility	3	tie 8
faith	4	tie 6
humour	5	tie 7
love	tie 6	tie 6
friendliness	tie 6	tie 7
compassion	tie 6	4
cultural understanding	tie 6	3
collaboration	tie 7	tie 8
teaching ability	tie 7	1
perseverance	tie 7	tie 7
positive attitude	tie 7	2
energy	tie 7	tie 8

Group 1: untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers
Group 2: trained and/or experienced ESL teachers

A contrast is also demonstrated in a comparison in the rankings of categories of knowledge. Untrained/inexperienced teachers rank personal knowledge/characteristics as the most important category and pedagogical knowledge as the least important category, while experienced teachers rank pedagogical as the most important and personal knowledge/characteristics as the least important. Even within the subgroup of less experienced teachers (those with less than 5 years of teaching experience), pedagogical knowledge still ranked as most important. Again, this confirms that even as early as within the first five years of teaching, teachers begin to realize the value of their pedagogical training. (See Table 5 for a comparison of the ranking of the categories.)

Table 5*: Comparison of categories of knowledge*

CATEGORY	Rank By Group 1	Rank By Group 2	Rank By Group 2a
Personal Knowledge/ Characteristics	1	3	tie 2
Content Knowledge	2	tie 2	3
Cultural Knowledge	3	tie 2	tie 2
Pedagogical Knowledge	4	1	1

Group 1: untrained and/or inexperienced ESL teachers
Group 2: experienced ESL teachers
Group 2A: experienced ESL teachers with less than 5 years of teaching experience

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).

It cannot be denied that the possession of certain personal characteristics is important for good teaching to occur. In conjunction with the previous study, this study was successful in bringing to light the differing perceptions untrained/inexperienced teachers and trained/experienced teachers have as to what these characteristics are, their relative importance to each other, and their relative importance compared to pedagogical training. As a teacher educator, I am encouraged that this study shows that after gaining even just a little experience, teachers begin to value their training more. I posit that as new teachers face difficult situations, they look to their pedagogical training for help, and their opinions about their training changes. At the beginning of my career as a teacher, I distinctly remember feeling very self-reliant and felt proud of my pioneering spirit. As I gained experience and was confronted with difficult situations in which reliance on my personality alone was not sufficient, I quickly realised that I needed to draw upon what I had learned in my education program. In short, my pedagogical training became more important to me as my experience grew, and while I cannot discount the need of certain personal qualities for any teacher's success, my experience and this study confirm that personality alone is not enough to sustain a successful career and the importance of one's training becomes more evident with classroom experience.

The implications for teacher training in the first part of this study (Spitzer, 2009) were:

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 (p. 90).

There are obvious shortcomings of both of these specific studies: the findings of both studies cannot be generalised, the reliability and validity of the surveys used in these studies and the data obtained from them remain unknown, the samples of both studies are small and may not be representative of the larger population of teacher candidates, and these particular studies might have been better suited for qualitative rather than quantitative analysis. Despite these shortcomings, I believe the findings of this study add to the value of the first part of this study. What I would add at the conclusion of this study is that because these perceptions change (and we teacher educators should be relieved that they do change), it is imperative that we address the perceptions of the untrained/inexperienced teachers during their training; I also believe it is imperative that we acquaint our students with the findings of this research (and hopefully other studies like this one in the future), namely that the perceptions they have as untrained/inexperienced teachers may change and in fact, reverse themselves. I am confident that future research will confirm these preliminary findings.

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APPENDIX A: The Survey

1. What is your initial area of certification?

2. How many years have you been teaching ESL or bilingual education?

3. Please rank the following qualities in order of importance using a scale of 1 (most important) to 10 (least important). (There are 14 qualities listed so you won't be able to list them all.)

_____Teaching ability   _____ Humour
_____Collaboration   _____ Flexibility
_____Patience   _____ Energy
_____Love
_____Friendliness
_____Faith
_____Compassion
_____Cultural understanding
_____Perseverance
_____Creativity
_____Positive attitude

4. 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)
_____Cultural knowledge (i.e. understanding of cultural context and characteristics of learners in that culture)