What Makes an English Teacher to Stand Out Among Others?

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Abstract

There is no doubt that in initial stages of second language learning, teachers' roles as immediate sources of guidance is very crucial. Teachers' roles in shaping language learners' second language knowledge is very determinant in English as a foreign language (EFL) context where most of the language learners wait to be fed up by the teachers. It goes without saying that a teacher must possess knowledge to be successful in developing successful language learners. However, it is often unclear what this knowledge truly encompasses. Accordingly, it is clear that all language teachers must possess knowledge of: the subjects to be taught, the skills to be developed, general and subject-specific methods for teaching and for evaluating student learning, and skills in effectively teaching students. In the same line, the present paper aims at considering the essential factors that should be taken into consideration by language teachers as basic requirements for becoming a successful teacher.

Keywords: Teachers' roles, Second language knowledge, Subject knowledge

1. Teachers should make knowledge accessible to all learners

It is really essential for a proficient teacher to make knowledge accessible to all language learners. Proficient teachers should act on the belief that all language learners can learn. They should treat all language learners equitably, recognizing the individual differences that distinguish one student from another and taking account of these differences in their practice. In fact, proficient teachers should adjust their practice based on observation and knowledge of their students' interests, abilities, skills, and knowledge.

In view of the above, proficient language teachers are required to understand how students develop and learn. Hence, they should incorporate the prevailing theories of cognition and intelligence in their practice. They should also be aware of the influence of context and culture on behavior. They develop students' cognitive capacity and their respect for learning.

2. Teachers should know the subjects they teach

Many studies related to the type of knowledge that teachers are required to posses emphasize that effective teachers should have a good command of the content knowledge of their discipline (Barnes, 2010; Hativa, Barak, & Simhi, 2001; Marzano, 2003; Shulman, 1986; Strong, 2007; Harmer, 2007). As a matter of fact, proficient teachers should have a rich understanding of the subject(s) they teach. Besides, they should know how to convey and reveal subject matter to the students. To this end, they should be aware of the background knowledge that students have.

Those teachers who have a good command of the subject matter understand where difficulties are likely to arise for the language learners and modify their lessons and practices accordingly. Accordingly, they create multiple paths to the subjects they teach. In fact, they never prescribe the same for all the students. However, it should be emphasized that tailoring type of lessons which match all the students' level is very difficult if not impossible. However, teachers are required to do their best to put this point into consideration when they try to select appropriate materials for their students.

3. Teachers should monitor the students learning

Proficient teachers create, enrich, maintain and alter instructional settings to capture and prolong the interest of their students and to make the most effective use of time. They understand how to motivate students to learn and how to maintain their interest even in the face of temporary failure. Proficient teachers should assess the progress of individual students as well as that of the class as a whole. They should employ multiple methods for measuring student growth and understanding and can clearly explain student performance to parents.

Proficient teachers measure their students' progress all the time by different methods. As a result, they can monitor their students' progress moment by moment. This type of monitoring helps the teachers to recognize the potential or possible drawbacks of the types of materials which they have employed. Hence, if they find out that the students have difficulty coping with the materials, they may modify or change them. This type of monitoring should be on-going.

4. Teachers should recognize individual differences

Many teachers ignore the individual differences and use the same materials which have been tried before for a given course with another group of language learners. These teachers claim that because, for example, particular types of materials have been utilized for many years by many teachers, they use the same without considering the fact that one group of language learners differ from another one. Moreover, individual differences play important role in making a decision about what materials to be employed.

To respond effectively to individual differences, teachers must know many things about the particular students they teach. Proficient teachers should know how the language learners have previously performed on standardized tests. This kind of specific understanding is essential because proficient teachers need to decide how best to tailor instruction. Proficient teachers should always diagnoses students' interests, abilities and prior knowledge. Therefore, when planning a unit on aging, for example, they will anticipate what concepts and activities certain language learners may find problematic.

Proficient teachers learn from their experiences. They learn from listening to their students, from watching them interact with peers, and from reading what they write. The information they gain about students in the course of instruction subsequently becomes part of their general knowledge of education. Such monitoring and learning is no easy feat. What teachers are able to see, hear and learn is colored by their own prior knowledge and experience.

5. Teachers should develop the cognitive capacity of their students

Teachers are concerned with their students' self-concept, with their motivation, with the effects of learning on peer relationships, and with the development of character, aspiration and civic virtues. These aspects of the student -- important as they are in their own right -- are also essential to intellectual development. Proficient teachers consider students' potential in this broader sense when making decisions about what and how to teach.

6. Teachers should acquire pedagogical content knowledge

Pedagogical content knowledge is not synonymous with knowledge of how to reveal content to students. According to Shulman (1986), pedagogical content knowledge includes an understanding of what makes the learning of specific topics easy or difficult: the conceptions and preconceptions that students of different ages and backgrounds bring with them to the learning of those most frequently taught topics and lessons. In other words, it includes knowledge of the most appropriate ways to present the subject matter to students through analogies, metaphors, experiments, demonstrations and illustrations.

Accordingly, knowing the content is different from knowing how to transfer the content to our students. There are some teachers who acquire a good command of the content knowledge but the lack the appropriate pedagogical knowledge. Thus, able teachers should keep current with the growing body of curricular materials -- including literature available through their professional organizations -- and constantly evaluate the usefulness of those materials based on their understanding of curriculum theory, of students, of subject matter, and of the school's and their own educational aims.

7. Teachers should employ various methods to reach their goals

Proficient teachers should know how to employ a variety of generic instructional skills. They should know how to lecture and how to oversee small cooperative learning groups. Although much of instruction is determined by the content to be taught, there are some commonalities about teaching methods that guide their practice. They are aware of what can reasonably be covered in a 60 minute roundtable discussion, when to hold back and let students figure out their own solutions, and what types of questions provoke the most thoughtful conversation.

However, it is not sufficient that teachers know about different modes of instruction. In fact, teachers should also know how to implement those strategies. Knowing about something and knowing how to do something are both forms of understanding central to teaching. Because students vary in learning styles and because different settings afford differing learning opportunities, proficient teachers should know when and how to alter the social and physical organizational structure of the learning environment.

It is not enough to be a master lecturer, for there are many times when lecturing is not an effective way to teach. An outdoor experiment, a mock trial or an economic simulation, for example, may be more appropriate. Alternatively, a debate might be a more effective way to engage students in thinking and

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learning. Teachers know about the breadth of options available to them, such as innovative instructional formats that involve discovery learning, conceptual mapping, brainstorming, working with computers, as well as more traditional tried-and-true methods.

In view of the above, teachers not only have the opportunity to vary instructional settings and to employ a range of instructional materials, they also have the opportunity to call on various human resources to custom-tailor the working environment for students. Proficient teachers should know how to mobilize students to tutor their peers and how to engage aides and volunteers as teaching assistants. In other words, students can be teachers for other students. Peer learning can be encouraged in various situations. In many cases, students show great interest in learning from other students. Therefore, teachers can grab the opportunity to give the students the chance to learn from each other.

8. Teachers should encourage students' engagement

Facilitating student learning is not simply a matter of placing the language learners in educative environments. Proficient teachers must also motivate them, capturing their minds and hearts and engage them actively in learning. The teacher's role in building upon students' interests and in sparking new passions is central to building bridges between what students know and can do and what they are capable of learning.

Proficient teachers need to know how to encourage students even in the face of temporary failure and the inevitable doubts that students meet as they push themselves to new affective, intellectual and physical planes. With such learning comes the real joy in education, the satisfaction of accomplishment. In relation to the role of the teacher to motivate student, Nunan (1991), for example, put forth the important role of the teacher in increasing motivation among language learners.

Accordingly, a success in language learning is measured in terms of the ability to carry out a conversation in the (target) language. Hence, if the language learners fail to learn how to speak or do not get any opportunity to speak in the language classroom, they may soon get de-motivated and lose interest in learning the language. This problem is common in EFL contexts where language learners have less chance to speak English. In fact, language learners in EFL context can only have limited speaking activities inside the classrooms. However, if the right activities are taught in the right way, language learning in class can be a lot of fun, raising general learner motivation and making the English language classroom a fun and dynamic place to be.

9. Teachers should always assess the students' progress

While teachers are not always the central actors in their students' educational experiences, they are ultimately responsible for the creation and maintenance of those experiences and bear a considerable responsibility for what students learn. Proficient teachers, therefore, can judge the relative success of the activities they design. They can track what students are learning (or not learning), as well as what they, as teachers, are learning.

Assessment in teaching is not a simple task; teachers must monitor the successes and failures of individual

students and evaluate their classes as collectives of learners. Additionally, they make judgments about themselves as teachers in relation to those students and classes. Although these judgments are interdependent of one another, they are not necessarily synonymous. One of the essential tensions of teaching is that teachers teach individual students, while managing groups.

Teachers should know that the purposes, timing and focus of an evaluation affect its form. They are intelligent observers of students -- their movements, their words and their minds. Teachers track student progress with a variety of evaluation methods, each with its own set of purposes, strengths and weaknesses. Their knowledge extends to creating their own, sometimes innovative, tools for evaluation, including portfolios, videotapes, demonstrations and exhibitions. In addition, they may use more traditional measures such as quizzes or exams. Sometimes teachers can ask questions in the middle of a group discussion in order to assess how well students are following the presentation of information; or they may talk individually with students while they are engaged in independent work. At other times they watch their students' behavior as they read to each other or work in the laboratory.

Teachers should not assign grades all the time. This is because evaluation is not always for the purpose of recording grades. In contrast, evaluation allows students and teachers to assess where they stand. Teachers also assess students to determine how much they have learned from a unit of instruction. Student responses then contribute to teachers' decisions about whether to reteach, review or move on. Finally, proficient teachers should help their students to engage in self-assessment.

10. Conclusion

In most language learning situations teachers are the immediate source of language input. In fact, the majority of the language learners in different language learning situations wait to be fed up with the teachers. This is what makes teachers' roles to be much more essential. In the same line, to be a proficient teacher requires making difficult and principled choices. Proficient teachers should employ technical knowledge and skill to foster the development of skills and respond to a wide range of language learners' needs and conditions. Accordingly, teachers are also always required to employ instructional methods and strategies.

In view of the above, the present research was set to serve as a guideline for those language teachers who want to stand out among others. To this end, teachers have the responsibility to question settled structures, practices, definitions of knowledge. Considering the fact that the knowledge base for teaching is growing steadily, proficient teachers should invent and test new approaches.

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