

Dear Diary

Mandana Arfa Kaboodvand

Prelude

The current study was conducted with a group of 8th grade students attending public schools in Iran and their English language teachers, seeking their perceptions of effective language teachers in their context.

The study was two-fold. During the first phase, the opinions of 300 students were sought through a questionnaire, to gain a general understanding of the perceptions of the learners. Then, since schools in Iran are not coeducational, eight girls and eight boys from four different schools were selected and interviewed, along with the four teachers who taught them. This helped to better gain an understanding of the views of the learners. The final phase of the study was devoted to analysing the findings without looking for any definite or pre-planned answers, yet with a focus on how language teacher effectiveness was conceptualised.

This study can be a part of a bigger plan or stand in contrast to understandings offered by other studies in other learning contexts. It also has significance for the teachers and their practice of teaching.

In this paper, which is in the form of a diary, I have tried to paint an elaborate picture of the journey that I made in order to conduct the study, which I hope will clarify the reasons for the study and also how I, as the researcher, was involved in the whole process.

Dear Diary,

It has been a while! Today after a long time I am quite excited about something. It has been constantly on my mind since yesterday. I think I have a new idea for an exciting study.

This is how it started. Yesterday morning, I had my teaching methodology class. We had quite a vibrant discussion about language teaching and then eventually a student (who always comes up with good questions) asked me a very simple question. She asked, "So what makes a good language teacher?" With no hesitation I answered, "It depends on many factors particularly the methodology that has been adopted." Then I gave a quite convincing presentation about what I meant. But the more I talked, the more dubious I became. Of course I did not tell the girl anything then. Does everything mainly depend on the methodology? To be honest, I couldn't wait for the class to end, so that I would have some time to reflect more on the question and my answer.

So anyway, since yesterday I have been thinking and reading. Methodology is certainly important, but so are many other factors. I believe there is so much room for researching the topic and examining it.

I have a lot to read.

Bye for now!

Dear Diary,

Good evening. Nothing was really going on during the past few days. I was just reading and thinking and looking for relevant information constantly. But here is the exciting news!!!! I am now sure that even though there are some strong studies available concerning effective language teachers, THERE IS STILL MUCH MORE NEED FOR RESEARCHING THE TOPIC. And I have decided that I really want to conduct the study! And now after a lot of reflection I can say that methodology is important, but is not the only determining factor!

So here is the plan. I want to seek the perception of the learners about effective teachers. Massive attention is being paid to the learners in modern language teaching, then their views and perceptions should be considered. I want to see what the students really think and believe about the characteristics an effective teacher should possess. Wow! On second thoughts, maybe I can even include the teachers as well and seek their opinion about effective language teachers. I have to see. And I am not yet so sure about who to study. I have given it some thought, but have to find out what is more feasible, but at the same time has been less studied. (I have also noticed that particularly in Iran and as far as the young learners are concerned there are not many studies.)

Oh! These days I reminisce the time when I was a pupil myself. I did have many favourite language teachers and some that I really hated. I keep thinking about them. To be honest, I still don't like the ones that I hated. Even as a teacher, I do not see the logic of what they did and how they behaved. I do understand that in a country like Iran, where English is a foreign language, there is limited access to modern facilities for many, and younger students do not have the opportunity to practise what they are learning in authentic situations, teachers are normally burdened with a great number of issues to think about and deal with. But I still don't see why some of them are so unkind or unhelpful! Teachers really play the most important role in the students' lives and education, don't they? Wow! I was so brave I decided to become a teacher!!! But I have to admit that after all these many years I still love the teachers that I loved! I hope my students enjoy my classes, too!

Dear Diary,

I am ready to conduct the study. The plan is ready. Just listen to what I will be doing. I have decided that I will seek the opinion of 8th grade school students in public schools in Tehran about what they think an effective language teacher at schools should be like. They are a good option, because they already have two years of experience of learning the language, but then they still have four more years to study.

Oh now listen to some of the very nice quotations that have really inspired me to do the study. One of them belongs to Williams and Burden (1997), who critique some of the existing studies done on identifying the characteristics of effective teachers. They believe that these guidelines have not been helpful to teachers. They believe:

in the real world teachers come in all shapes and sizes. With a wide range of different personalities, beliefs and ways of working. They also come from different backgrounds and belong to different cultures. We would, therefore, expect them to work in different ways that suit their own personalities and situations. (p. 47)

I also read this nice article by Kumaravadivelu (Oh! I love his work! He is the best!) which he had written in 2012 and it also made me more determined to do my study. He emphasizes that teaching is much more than learning teaching methods and believes that factors such as learner perception, culture and teacher cognition should not be overlooked!

There are so many others that I like, too, of course, like the works of Brosh, 1996; Brown, 2009; Hall, 2011; and so many others.

I have decided to give out a questionnaire to some students in Tehran and after studying them, choose a group and interview them to get a better insight of their thoughts. I will be interviewing a few language teachers, too, to see what their perception of teacher effectiveness is. So the first step is making a good questionnaire. Oh! So much to do!

I have contacted a language teacher asking her to let me conduct my pilot study in her classes. This would be unofficial of course.

(I really hope that besides providing a concept of effectiveness, my study will be useful for those who teach without having much say in the choice of curriculum, books and even final exams.)

Dear Diary,

I just talked to the teacher again!! She agreed! She even promised to introduce me to a male teacher at a boy's school, so that I can do a part of my pilot study in their school as well. So I have unofficially started. I can't write anymore. I have a lot to do!

Dear Diary,

Today was the day. I went to a class and asked the 20 girls to write me an essay about the qualities that they thought a good language teacher had to possess. I stressed that I wanted something that would mainly concern language teachers.

...

I have just finished reading their work.

Now I have to make my questionnaire. My head is so full of all that I have read in books and in the essays of these students, and

Dear Diary,

THE QUESTIONNAIRE IS READY TO BE PILOTED! I am off to the school now! I will keep you posted!

I gave my questionnaire along with a language test I had prepared to 64 students in the girls' school. The teacher is so lovely! She was beautiful both inside and outside and even went over the questionnaire with me. Tomorrow I am going to the boys' school. I hope the teacher there would be as nice.

Oh! I guess I had not told you about the test. I will explain it later.

Dear Diary,

I am done with the pilot study. And finally the final questionnaire is ready. I had forgotten how demanding it is to make a questionnaire. The pilot study really helped though. I think it is a good one. I have included questions on teachers' management and behaviour, appearance (yes appearance!), language proficiency, and finally pedagogic competence. I have tried to consider the cultural aspects of schools in Iran when preparing the questions.

So yeah tomorrow I am off to the ministry of education to get the necessary permits. I need to convince them that this research is necessary and doable and ethical and does not waste the students' time and does not put anybody in danger and I have to give an official and written request, but I have heard that there may be interviews, too. The questionnaire and the test should both be provided.

I can't wait to get started! 😊But what if they don't give me the permit?!

Dear Diary,

Hip hip Hurray! I finally got the permit. Let me tell you, it was one of the most difficult things to do! I really had lost hope. There was one man in charge that for some unknown reason gave me wrong information and that made everything very complicated. I don't even want to remember the process!!! BUT I MADE IT! I explained to them that since there are many schools in Tehran with many students with different socio-economic and even cultural backgrounds, I had decided to use a geographical pattern, two schools in the northern part, two in the southern, two in the west, two in south and two in the centre. Also I explained that I needed the permit for both girls' and boys' schools. I was so worried that they would not let me do that, but now I have the letters addressed to the MOE sub-offices of five districts and that is good enough for now.

I will get started from tomorrow! I am super excited, but a bit nervous as well. I will not think about it tonight! Shall I watch a movie? Yeah! That is just what I will do!

Dear Diary,

Good evening! What a day it has been! I slept very late last night. Watched Harry Potter and the Half Blood Prince. Nice, but too long! Woke up early, too much going on on my mind. I went to the first school. I was so worried, because the head of the school had to have the final say. It turned out that she was an adorable head, but the language teacher was soooooo mean! She hated me for no reason! They let me go to the class alone and talk to the students, who were very cute and helpful. They filled in the questionnaire and did the test. I had to explain to the students that I needed their name on both the exam paper and questionnaire, but if anyone of them felt uncomfortable they could just hand them in without their names. Everybody had put their name. They seemed interested in my work. I was done at about 10:30.

By the way, I was so excited and I had some time, so I decided to try my luck in another school. They were nice, too. They let me in immediately! In that school the language teacher and the head asked me about other research on the same topic and then were curious to know why I wanted to conduct mine. This was great, because it gave me the chance to discuss my purpose and plan with them.

I explained that most of the studies on recent models of teacher effectiveness have taken place in the US, the UK and the Netherlands (Campbell et al, 2004) and Australia, where the teacher and the school have more freedom in selecting the teaching material and their approach to language teaching. I also talked about how in Kumaravadivelu's (2006) words in the modern world the particularity, practicality and possibility of the pedagogies mattered. And while the pedagogy in Iran is still very much based on a transmission model of education, it is changing and the demand for constructivist models exists. After using all these big words to sound very professional, I tried to come down to earth and talked about my plans to get some insight into the way students living in Tehran see effectiveness, or rather effective language teachers. I also explained that building the trust between teachers and teenagers was not easy, but if it happened then it would make a lot of difference. They both agreed with me. Then they also asked me about the reason I was conducting a test. I felt the language teacher was quite concerned as she believed that most of the students would not know the answers to most of the questions. I explained that this was only for the selection of the students that I would be interviewing much later. I explained that the test had been prepared based on their school textbook of the year and I expected that many, of them would not know the answers to most of the questions at this phase. This, I hope put her mind at ease. Oh! I also tried to explain why language teacher effectiveness was different in some ways from other types of teacher effectiveness. I could see that the language teacher was

really pleased and the head was impressed. I even promised the teacher to give her Borg's (2006), Brown's (2009) and Brosh's (1996) articles.

I can say that I had a very good day. I am dying of curiosity to find out what the students have put in the questionnaire.

I will start processing the info asap. Tomorrow is another big day! Wish me luck as I have to go to yet another school. This time I am trying a boys' school. It is rather far, so I don't think I can do more than one school.

Dear Diary,

Can you believe that the head of the school today did not let me in. He said that the students had more important things to do than answering my questions. He was mean! I had another boys' school in the same district in mind. It took me a while to find it, but, unlike the first one, the head here was really welcoming! The boys were so naughty!!!! But they really wanted to know more about why I was giving them the questionnaire. The idea of doing a test was very unappealing, but anyway they did it.

Dear Diary,

Sorry for not writing to you for a while. I was so busy and so tired, but the good news is that the first phase is done. I have put all the information in SPSS and now have an idea of what these students think. At times I have become pleasantly surprised and now I believe I have a clear picture of the type of questions I will be asking during my interviews. Altogether I collected 300 papers. 190 of them (102 boys and 88 girls) I could use. These were the students who had little additional knowledge of English beyond what they had learned and were learning at secondary school.

I am so happy I did this phase. Now I have a general understanding of what the students believe about effective language teachers and so I think based on this have good interview questions. Also now I am quite known in the schools and I hope I have been able to gain the trust of the teachers, school authorities and the students, which is also helpful for the interviews.

And, tada! Here is what I have learned:

- Many of the students did not particularly enjoy learning English! (Teenagers!!!!)
- Many of them liked to learn how to speak English!!! This is not in line with the syllabus being used in the schools. (This is good news.)
- Even though students liked to learn how to speak they did not like the classes to be held in English, I mean that they did want English to be used as the language of instruction. (So how do they think this can happen - through learning grammar?! I have to dig more information!)

- Many students believed that teachers’ good accent mattered. (I am quite surprised. I did not expect that accent would matter to them this much!)
- On the whole teachers’ rapport with the students was considered more important than the other attributes put forth in the questionnaire. (This is also worth unmasking. I do have many questions about this bit.)
- Some students wanted serious teachers.
- Teachers’ taking care of their looks and paying attention to their attire were the other points raised. (Oh my God! I loved this! It was an inspiring finding! This is what I will definitely try to dig more information about during the interviews!)
- The majority of the students liked their teachers to know them, and address them with their first name. They also liked the teacher to sometimes talk about topics unrelated to the lesson. (This is quite interesting as most of the teachers, particularly at boys’ schools, use the students’ family names to address them!)
- More than half of the students did not like the teacher to be the only decision maker in the classes, which also suggests a changing of attitudes. (So. no more top-down teaching? This is also quite interesting!)
- According to the students, teachers’ information about culture of English-speaking countries is not really important. (This I somehow expected, as the syllabus is totally deprived of any reference to foreign cultures, but it was kind of sad!)
- More than half of them believed that language teachers at least in some ways should be different from teachers of other subjects at schools. (I was hoping for more, but still good! And I am so curious to know what teachers of other subjects would think of this!!!) This is what they thought:

Students’ views The language teacher should be...	Number	%
younger	119	73.9
more elegant	131	68.9
kinder	151	79.5
more serious	71	37.4
more fun	148	77.9
livelier	151	79.5
more caring	120	63.8
more patient	152	80.0
more religious	97	51.1
using more supplementary materials	124	65.3
more up-to-date	161	84.7

Now based on all the findings I know that at least this sample of students had a lot of common beliefs and attitudes regardless of their gender, test marks and the district they studied in.

Dear Diary,

I have finished marking the exams as well. Now I have to wait for a while to conduct the next test and select the students that I need to interview.

So here is the plan. Towards the end of the school year I am going to the same ten schools and administer the same test I have given them. Then check to see how much improvement they have made on average.

I have also prepared another questionnaire with two questions only. I will give that along with the exam. The questionnaire asks if they were happy with their current language class and if they were satisfied with it.

Then I will select the classes and then 16 students in the classes that I want to interview. I will interview the teachers of the same classes. This will give my sample a good variety.

For now, I have to concentrate on my interview questions.

Dear Diary,

I miss talking to you, but I really needed a few days of break. I was tired. I have to admit that I am quite pleased with the study so far, but actually the interview phase is even more important to me. So what is my plan? I am going to conduct a semi-structured interview. I would like the students to have the freedom to speak their minds, but I guess these young ones will need some guidelines as well.

I also need to learn Nvivo. I guess it can help me organize the details of the interview.

Sorry! I will not do anything academic for a few days again, I believe! Goodbye for now!

Dear Diary,

Just a quick note again. Something unexpected happened. The permits that the MOE had given me were not effective anymore!!!! I had to renew them for this phase. This time it was not so difficult! But I have to rush as the exam time is approaching. Nobody would answer my questions during the exams.

Dear Diary,

Today marks the sixth month since the beginning of my study in schools. I am getting ready to go for the next bit. So off to schools for the test and the second questionnaire from next week. Wish me luck! I have the permits, but still am worried

that the schools would not be very welcoming this time. Keep your fingers crossed for me!!!!



Dear Diary,

I love the students. They have been really nice. They did what I asked them without any complaint. They really welcomed me into their classes. They remembered me from the other time and acted as if I was part of their school. I feel good! Now I have to mark their tests and go over the answers to the two questions and voilà make my selections.

Dear Diary,

Good news. I have selected the students and the teachers that I want to interview. I have put their names in this table.

	Achievers who are happy and satisfied with their current language teacher		Achievers who are unhappy and dissatisfied with their current language teacher	
	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>
<i>District x</i>	Fatemeh	Amir Reza	Mobina	Alireza
<i>District y</i>	Sogol	Mohammad	Zahra	Milad
	Underachievers who are happy and satisfied with their current language teacher		Underachievers who are unhappy and dissatisfied with their current language teacher	
	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>	<i>Girls</i>	<i>Boys</i>
<i>District x</i>	Maryam	Ali Akbar	Marziyeh	Farjad
<i>District y</i>	Mohadaseh	Aidin	Zeynab	Abdollah

I will also interview their teachers. Mr Jalali and Ms Mansoori are loved by the students and Mr Alizadeh and Ms Jalali, well not really!

Dear Diary,

So far I have been to three of the schools. The male heads were polite, but I could see that they were getting fed up with me. This was only my third time, for goodness' sake, and I was not really taking the class time that much!!! Tomorrow I am going to

the last school. To be honest this last school has been my favourite. So I am not so worried! Oh! By the way, the three teachers have also agreed to be interviewed. Let's see what the fourth one would say.

I was so worried the students would not open up to me or that they would not have much to say. But even the weakest one had a lot of nice comments. They were all lovely and quite serious about taking part in the study.

I will let you know what they have said soon.

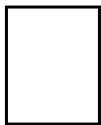
Dear Diary,

Yeah!!!! I am through with the interviews with the students. Each took an average of 20 minutes. We talked about the characteristics, behavioural traits, competencies and skills that they believed the language teachers working in Iranian public schools should have to be considered effective. Now I have to listen and listen and listen and transcribe and analyse their works and code them. Good that I learned Nvivo. I hope I can use it efficiently.

But the interview with the teachers is still left!!!! So that is the priority.

Dear Diary,

I couldn't wait to come home to write to you about my interview with one of the male teachers. OMG! It lasted for about 90 minutes. Oh! First of all, the head of the school was so surprised that Mr Alizadeh had even agreed to be interviewed by me! He was in his fifties and had a long job experience. He was ultra-religious and had very peculiar (this is my polite way of putting it) beliefs about almost everything. He did not even listen to my questions and would just talk about everything that he liked to talk about. I had a lot of disagreements with him; so that was my challenge to stay professional and do the interview skilfully! I think I did it; but it was really difficult. And now I have to listen to his comments again and again and again while transcribing! This is how I looked during my interview:



This is how I felt:



And this is how I am exactly feeling at this moment:



Dear Diary,

I am through with the interviews with the teachers as well. The other three were much easier than the first one! I will write about them later. I liked what I heard. A lot of food for thought.

Dear Diary,

I AM EXHAUSTED! Transcribing is boring, and interesting! How can a job be both boring and interesting at the same time? I really can't explain! I really want this phase to end though, so that I can get started with the analysis. I already have a lot of thoughts. And to be honest, I will not let anybody know that I find transcribing boring. It may sound unprofessional!

Dear Diary,

I am writing to you today, because I feel very happy. I have finished transcribing and already have some ideas about the most frequent comments. Now I feel really close to the findings of my study. The study that I began about a year ago! I can't believe that it is almost a year since I got started. Too soon to celebrate though!

Dear Diary,

I have coded the interviews with the students. At first I came up with 62 codes for the interview with the students; then I could categorize them into six sub-themes and, voilà, now I finally have three themes that I believe cover all the areas:

Themes	Sub-themes
Students' perceptions of learning English at school	Students' views about learning English, language teachers and the syllabus
Students' perceptions of the relationship between personal attributes of language teachers and their effectiveness	Teachers' behaviour
	Teachers' appearance

Students' perceptions of teachers' knowledge and those professional skills that contribute to language teachers' effectiveness	Teachers' pedagogic and language knowledge
	Choice of content
	Classroom practice

I am also very impressed with the comments the students have made. Not that I necessarily agree with them, of course. From now on, I will share with you some of the comments that they have made to show you what I mean and how I see them.

Did you know that only three of the 16 students were interested in learning English? Two boys and five girls did not like learning the language at all. Surprisingly, there was no pattern in their dislike for English. The students belonged to both high and low achieving groups and some liked their current classes, while some did not.

Of course it is understandable. They don't get to see many foreigners or go abroad, so don't see the exact and immediate use of learning English.

I will write about the rest of what they said later!

Dear Diary,

Just listen to the rest of my findings. The girls and boys had quite a lot to say about their perception of the kind of relationship between an effective language teacher and the students. They commented on many different aspects. Can you guess what they were?!

Today I played a game with my colleagues. Although I teach at university, still I thought it would be interesting to see their perspective. I gave them a list of adjectives and told them to guess which ones most of the students had mentioned.

The list consisted of these adjectives: serious, friendly, fun, kind, tolerant, fair, credible, religious, interested in their job, strict.

Almost nobody could guess that there were a few students who actually liked the teacher to be serious. And almost nobody would believe it when I said that the 13 year-olds did not necessarily like a teacher who was too funny. Of course, when we discussed it a little more, it made better sense. One thing a lot of them thought the students would want was for the teacher to be fair, but that was not among the very top priorities of the students! I told them that friendliness, kindness, seriousness, good sense of humour, credibility, interest in teaching and being religious were the themes which the students had brought up during the interviews. Then I challenged them again. This is what I did! I asked them to guess what the students really meant by these words. After all, this was the reason I had decided to hold interviews in the first place! And finally I showed them the table I had prepared based on what the students had said:

Codes	Definition	No of students	No of comments
Friendliness	Teachers behaving in a way that students would feel comfortable communicating with them	15	24
Kindness	Being good-tempered, and running stress-free classes	10	20
	Being patient with students' linguistic and behavioural mistakes		
	Being fair		
Seriousness	Having dry classes that would scare the students; opposed to friendliness	7	15
	discipline		
Sense of humour	Telling jokes and funny stories	10	12
	Creating an atmosphere of ease and fun		
Credibility	Winning the trust of the students by their language knowledge and/or their behaviour	10	14
Interest in teaching	Teachers showing that they enjoy teaching, sharing their knowledge and spending time with the students	5	7
Being religious	Direct practice or promotion of Islamic beliefs in the classes	3	3

It was kind of fun. But would you like to know more? Oh! Well! I have to go now. I will write more in a few hours.

Here I come again. So, right back to the students' perceptions. Let me just summarize what they said. The interpretations of friendliness word were not exactly the same. It meant *'being nice'*, *'letting the students communicate with them'* and *'relating to the students'*. Aidin, Abdollah, and Alireza thought that the teacher should really act as if he was their *'friend'* so that in Aidin's words *'the students would understand the lesson'*. However, over-friendliness was not considered desirable by many.

'Kindness' suggested that the students liked the teacher to be *'good-tempered'*, and *make the students feel comfortable*. So how could this be done? By *"getting to know them"* or *"calling them by their first names"* or *"having a nice voice"* or *"not shouting at the students"*. Zahra's interpretation of the teachers' kindness directly related to the test scores:

The students should be comfortable with their teacher. They should not have stress, worrying that now she wants to ask us questions and I don't know the

answer. She should not give us low marks. For example, for mid-term, she should not give the students low marks. The students should feel comfortable with her.

Patience was another manifestation of teachers' kindness. It meant giving the students enough time to think or answer questions and also not to shout at the students. Fairness of the teacher was mentioned only three times by the students and it could somehow be linked to their kindness. By fairness two students meant the teacher not discriminating. Marzিয়েh's interpretation was different. She said that the teacher had to accept her mistakes if she made any.

A 'good sense of humour', to some, meant teachers '*cracking jokes every now and then*', and creating laughter. Fatemeh believed if she were a teacher and if she realised that the students were tired, she would tell jokes. A few of course mentioned that they did not want this to be happening all the time and when teaching the teacher had to be serious. Six of the students talked about the importance of the teacher being serious. Some, though, believed that too much severity would put the students off. But one, for example, believed that if the teacher was not serious, then the students would not study hard. The general attitude was that the teacher should maintain discipline and if the students were noisy or inattentive, then the teacher had to act very seriously.

The next important characteristic was teachers' being credible and trustworthy. The students mainly believed that the teachers' ability to answer all of their questions would make them credible. For instance, Zeynab said:

I won't very much trust a teacher who cannot answer many of my questions. But if she doesn't know the answer to one question it is ok.

Also they believed in order to be credible the teacher should know how to speak English. Another characteristic that five of the students directly mentioned and admired in an effective language teacher was teachers' interest in teaching and sharing knowledge. They believed teachers should show genuine interest and willingness to spend time with the students and be concerned about their learning.

Finally, three boys, Abdollah, Amir Reza and Farjad gave hints about the importance of the teacher being religious. Two thought the teacher should '*begin the class in the name of God*' and '*remember God*'. Farjad thought that the teacher should have enough religious knowledge to answer any likely questions that the students had in that regard.

Dear Diary,

I have more exciting findings. Remember in the questionnaire we had these questions about teachers' appearance? So the interviews gave me the chance to learn a bit more about this.

Clothes were a major issue. All the girls who were interviewed liked the teacher to have a good wardrobe and be good-looking in general!!! This meant that they liked her to change her style of clothes during the school year, wear matching clothes and nice colours. Marziyeh and Zeynab mentioned that all the girls discussed the teacher's clothes. Almost all girls said that students paid more attention to the teachers and the lessons of the teachers who they believed dressed better. As Marziyeh said:

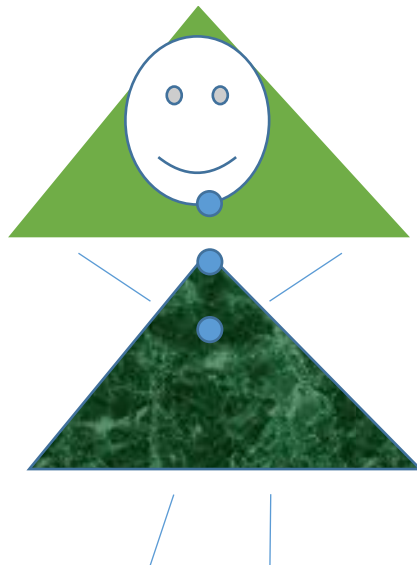
When our teacher is wearing something nice, everybody talks about it. The nicer the teacher looks, the more interested the students would be to study.

Some of the boys insisted that the way the teacher dressed did not really influence their learning, while some did. But Farjad did pay a little attention and liked it when a teacher wore a suit and cologne. He said that boys, too, talked about the teachers' appearance and believed that a smartly dressed teacher created good spirit.

This is really significant for Iran with the religious dress codes and hijab in public places!! We usually choose to wear sober colours clothes at work, but should we? I do not recall having seen much about the relationship between teachers' appearance and their effectiveness in other studies.

And now I have to go shopping! I need some more colourful clothes that are at the same time appropriate for my workplace. I have a feeling that university students would also agree with the younger students!

So this is me going to work tomorrow! What do you think about green?!



Dear Diary,

This bit deals with the kind and amount of knowledge they thought an effective language teacher should possess and also what they should be teaching. The findings were quite interesting. We talked about the knowledge of skills and sub-skills that the language teacher had to have, and also about the importance of the pedagogic knowledge of the teacher.

I thought that since the language teacher's main responsibility in public schools in Iran is to teach the content of the course-book and prepare the students for the final tests and also since the book places almost no emphasis on speaking skill, students would not demand it as much as grammar, reading, vocabulary and also translation. But all the of 16 students talked about the importance of the teacher's speaking knowledge. As I said before, some even mentioned that the teachers' ability to speak English led to their gaining credibility among the students.

Code	No. of student s	No. of comment s
Speaking and accent	16	44
Grammar	11	13
Writing	11	14
Reading	9	10
Listening	3	3
Translation	4	4
Vocabulary	2	2
General knowledge	15	24
Knowledge of the content of the book	6	8
Knowledge of teaching methods	4	7

All of the students had comments about *accent*. (Of course I noticed that most really meant pronunciation.) Interestingly, they did not seek a native-like accent. They liked their teacher to have the kind of accent that '*they would understand*'. They did not see teachers' authentic English accents as desirable. I guess if the stronger students who knew better English due to taking lessons outside school had been included in the study, they would state otherwise.

As I expected, grammar was the sub-skill which was rated very highly as it is one of the major components of their course-books. By knowing grammar the students mainly meant teachers' knowledge of syntactic rules and their ability to do

the relevant grammar exercises from their books correctly. Alireza thought that knowing grammar was the key to learning reading and speaking; therefore, the teacher had to know grammar to be able to teach it. All the 11 students who mentioned grammar believed in the importance of teacher’s knowledge of grammar.

So these were their major comments. The rest of the skills did not attract that much attention.

Dear Diary,

Today I am writing a short note about the content that the students liked to be covered. Teachers’ hands are sort of tied because they have no say in choosing the course book of course, but I wanted to know whether the students wanted only the book or something a little more.

Ha! Ha! The majority of the students wanted activities beyond the prescribed syllabus:

Code	No of students	No of comments
Material mostly emphasized in the syllabus	15	46
Material given less or no priority in the syllabus	16	58

The students elaborated on the ways they wanted these activities to be included in the curriculum. The students liked story books, jokes, extra exercise, and sometimes movies and posters. Milad, for example, believed teachers should help the students to “understand” rather than “memorize”.

Dear Diary,

How should the teacher manage the class?

Codes	No of student s	No of comment s
Creating an interesting climate	15	44
Making the lesson understandable	16	49
Engaging in activities beyond the prescribed syllabus	14	28
Considering the students	9	21
Language of instruction	9	14

Tests	9	14
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On the whole, the students liked the teachers to teach in such a way that they could easily understand the lesson. They clarified that they expected all the points in the book to be taught, particularly grammar; all the exercises to be checked; all their questions to be addressed, and the likely questions of the tests to be practised. Also they believed that the teachers had better explain things in Persian. Only three liked the teacher to teach solely in English.

The gist of what the majority said was “I want to learn English, but teach it in Persian!!!!” They were so worried they might not be able to understand the teacher if she/he spoke English while teaching.

Teachers’ building the right rapport with the students was another argument. On the whole, almost all of these students agreed that teachers should begin the class with a smile and also give a break in the middle of the lesson or when they notice that the students are tired or bored. They expected the teachers to somehow show that they enjoyed spending time with the students and teaching them. I liked this comment.

Wow! The data collected from interviews is not so big, but still shows that the students have much to say and share. Teachers, pay attention to the demands of your students! I believe you won’t regret it. Like this you can encourage and motivate the students and then become more effective.

Dear Diary,

Good evening. Today, I am in the mood for writing. This is all about my interview with the teachers. So who were they?

They had between 10 and 30 years of language teaching experience in public schools in Iran. Three of them, Ms Mansoori, Mr Tabibi and Mr Alizadeh had a bachelor’s degree in English language teaching from Iranian universities and one, Ms Jalali was a graduate student in the same field. Mr Alizadeh was the weird one I told you about, but after listening to our interview again I noticed one thing, he was a devoted teacher. I really cannot imagine myself being his student though!!! I can say at times he had dogmatic views. He was not favoured by most of the students. Neither was Ms Jalali. I interviewed them individually in their schools They all very patiently answered my questions. (I liked Ms Mansoori the most! She was very pleasant.)

So what did we talk about? I have made a table of all we discussed:

Themes	Sub-themes
Teachers’ perception of contextual factors	Teachers’ job satisfaction
	Teachers and students expectations
	Teachers and parents

Teachers' perception of the knowledge and professional skills that contribute to their effectiveness	Teachers' pedagogic and language knowledge
	Choice of content
	Classroom practice
Teachers' perception of the relationship between their personal attributes and their effectiveness	Teachers' behaviour
	Teachers' appearance

All of the teachers believed that they very much relied on their own planning and capabilities. They all had comments on the poor syllabus and books and very few hours of instruction per week and not getting any feedback and/or appreciation from management. They basically relied on their own intuition and also the result of the tests that the students took. Teachers thought that contextual factors influenced their effectiveness or ineffectiveness. Impressive isn't it?

When it came to effective class management, the teachers did not exactly share the same perceptions. Ms Mansoori's strategy was mutual respect and peace. She believed that even if a student did not learn anything, she should still be viewed with respect:

Respectful relations are very important. I try my best to follow this rule myself, too. I get the feedback, too. This is very important.

Ms Jalali's priority was establishing classroom rules and expecting all to follow them. Mr Alizadeh also added that the students had learned that when he was teaching they were not allowed to utter even a single word.

So one teacher wants mutual respect, and the other teacher wants obedience to rules!!! Different views on effective classroom management.

The teachers had some comments about what they thought students' expectations of language teachers were. Ms Mansoori had some comments about how she thought students viewed language teachers compared to the teachers of other subjects:

I think sometimes the students look at language teachers in a different way. They have different expectations. I don't know how to put it. They want you to have a higher social status and maybe be more elegant.

Ok! I have to go now. I will get back asap. Still so much left to say.

.... I am back. Now the big question is, did the teachers think that they had to know how to speak? And the answer is YES! They, too, thought that otherwise they would not be credible in the eyes of the students. (So they agree with the students.) To three of the teachers a good accent was important, but it mainly meant correct pronunciation of the words in the book. Ms Jalali mentioned that students did not

like *'very strong accents'*, meaning native-like British or American accent. Mr Tabibi, though, insisted that teachers should know both the British and the American pronunciations of the words in the school textbook. Not surprisingly, grammar received some attention. But the other skills were not much discussed.

One more comment that was interesting to me was that of Mr Alizadeh's. (The only one of his comments that I liked!!!!) He was the only teacher who mentioned that he owed his success as a language teacher to his university education and some of his professors. The fact that all of the teachers had university education in the field of language teaching may be evidence that they were at least to some degree familiar with language teaching trends; however, and on the other hand, not mentioning them to me suggests that they really did not believe that this knowledge was vital. For instance, Ms Jalali talked about some methods that she had previously used in one of her classes. She thought that what she had done was **not** inspired by her university education. (This is sad!!!! I feel disappointed!)

Wow! I need to eat. So the rest is for tomorrow.

Dear Diary,

Back to business. Here is the rest of the teacher's perceptions. What would they choose to teach? Surely the priority is the course book and grammar. The teachers genuinely thought that the knowledge of grammatical rules was imperative for learning a language and did not believe in teaching it only because they were part of the syllabus.

So how about speaking? Ms Mansoori said:

There is not much time for us to speak in English in the class, but even saying a few words in reply to a student who has asked you something in English makes a difference.

And how would they manage their classes?

Codes	No. Of teachers	No of comments
Showing concern for students' learning	4	48
Doing activities beyond the prescribed syllabus	4	21
Creating an interesting climate	4	15
Planning	4	15
Paying attention	3	4

to class discipline		
Language of instruction	3	4

All of the teachers interviewed really wanted their students to learn. So they prepared tests and planned what to teach based on the results of the tests.

Ms Jalali tried to involve all the students in class activities; and therefore, would give all of them some responsibility:

Since there is a lot of difference in the proficiency level of the students, and those who know good English get bored and upset and disturb the class and cannot be controlled, I ask the students to do the teaching. So most of the time the students do the teaching. Usually, they present the lesson, sometimes making PowerPoint slides. Then I complete what they have taught and explain the problem areas and summarize the lesson.

Every now and then, the two female teachers would give some group-work in some of the classes. They thought this could contribute to the students getting more involved. This is quite innovative as in Iran we really don't give a lot of group work!

The teachers all agreed that revision of the main points particularly toward the end of the year was very important. Additionally, Ms Mansoori tried to '*simplify grammar*'. She did not elaborate on this and explain how she would do that, but she was the one teacher who directly talked about making the lesson more understandable to the students.

Finally, the teachers also acknowledged the importance of encouraging the students and giving them motivation now and then. Mr Alizadeh, for example, used marks for positive reinforcement - he would give several opportunities to a student who had done poorly in one test. All of the four teachers highly valued an interesting climate, and, therefore, tried to include activities beyond the prescribed syllabus that they thought were interesting to the learners and did not take a lot of time to cover. They used arts and crafts, puzzles, flashcards, plays, audios of authentic dialogues and so on.

On the whole, all of the teachers said that they paid attention to the students' mood. If they noticed that the students had got tired they would consider doing something different.

Hats off to the teachers. The course books didn't have any of these supplementary materials Therefore; the teachers had to plan these activities. They all agreed that by careful planning they were able to finish the book in time and do many exercises and prepare the students for the test. (We, teachers really deserve to be appreciated!!!!)

Let me add that even though the importance of planning was emphasized, they believed that flexibility and more importantly emotional well-being of the students was also important to some of these teachers.

Class discipline was also vital to them. Mr Alizadeh said that when he was teaching he expected the students to sit still and even put their hands on the desk!!!! (Can you believe it? 13/14 year-old boys sitting still with hands on the table!!!!) He said he reminded them of the importance of being well-behaved almost every session,

but they are so afraid of me that they don't utter a word. I have clarified to them what kind of a student I want. When I am teaching they have to have their hands on the desk and should not make any movements.

Mr Alizadeh was concerned about the emotional well-being of the students, too; however, the comment shows that he did not mind if the students were afraid of him when he was teaching. Does this show that we still have that top-down approach to teaching and learning? (He was older than the other three teachers, so maybe he still had some traditional class management techniques. He wouldn't of course agree!!!!)

In order to make sure that the students understood the lesson, the teachers believed that the language of instruction had to be a combination of Persian and English and none of them used English as their only or main language of instruction.

Finally, being religious was pointed out as a strong characteristic of the teacher by Mr Alizadeh, who was extremely religious himself. He believed that all teachers should be allowed to discuss religious matters in their classes.

I am off to work! The rest will come later. I have left my favourite topic, appearance, for later!

My very dear diary,

The very tired me is back, but I have decided to write anyway! So let's see what the teachers thought about the importance of appearance to effectiveness.

Yeah! Three of them believed it counted! Mr Alizadeh was the only teacher who did not comment on it. Ms Mansoori mentioned that even if the teachers did not choose their clothes based on the students' taste of fashion, they had to know their favourite brands and what they considered fashionable. Mr Tabibi also believed that those times when he took better care of his appearance he was more welcomed by the students.

I think being handsome and well-dressed enhances communication. If a teacher is not good looking, the students will be put off. But in contrast, when the teacher looks good, the students get attracted to him.

Ms Jalali and Mr Tabibi both believed that language teachers in particular were expected to pay relatively more attention to the way they looked. Ms Jalali said:

Both the students and colleagues pay attention to [the way that language teachers dress]. Sometimes my new colleagues ask me what I teach and they say that my looks show that. The language teacher should take care of her looks and be neat and tidy, maybe not so expensive clothes, but neat and tidy. Girls from even primary school pay attention to this. I feel that the students expect the language teacher to be more elegant. But at school all the colleagues are almost the same. We have to obey the rules. There is not much space for being fashionable. We have to follow the rules set.

Done for the day!!!!

Dear Diary,

I finally had a good, but short sleep last night. I have just come back from work. All day I was waiting to come back and write to you again. The study is done and the analysis is almost done.

I have quite approached the end of my journey. This is the last time I am writing to you. It is almost 18 months since I started my journey. Do I still think that working on perceptions was important? YES, more than ever. Also, now I am sure that:

All of the stakeholders have voices and should be heard and taken seriously.

There are many more things I still would like to investigate. For instance, I would like to observe some classes. Maybe I could do the same study in private schools. I have some ideas, but they have to wait for a while.

Keeping you was a pleasure and gave me a lot of insight into my study. Good bye.

Epilogue

This study was based on the assumption that reality is socially constructed and, therefore, needs to be constantly explored. Reality does not always come in one form, and the aim of this study was to try to unveil the demands of individual students and their teachers through understanding their experiences and their perceptions. As some other studies such as those of Brown (2009) and Barcelos and Kalaja (2003) have also suggested, perceptions influence reality. Teachers' beliefs and perceptions do form their actions. Students' perceptions can play many roles. Context also affects perceptions. The perceptions of the stakeholders involved in this study suggested that Iranian learners and teachers had some unique desired traits as well as more commonly accepted ones

The table below shows the most common traits that the students and teachers in this study had in mind:

Students' most frequent comments	Frequency	Teachers' most frequent comments	Frequency
Making the lesson understandable	49	Showing concern about students' learning	48
Knowing how to speak English	44	Relationship with students	23
Creating an interesting climate	44	Including activities beyond the prescribed syllabus	21
Knowing how to speak English	44	Showing interest in teaching	20
Relationship with students	37	Involving the students	16
Taking care of their appearance	31	Creating an interesting climate	15
Teaching speaking	29	Planning	15
Including activities beyond the prescribed syllabus	28	Taking care of their appearance	8

One of the concepts that was addressed quite frequently by both groups was *rapport*. Different studies on modern language classes have emphasized the importance of this (e.g. Senior, 2006) However, in the Iranian context in public schools, *rapport* may lead to a different outcome as compared to most of the modern communicative language classes. In communicative classes, *rapport* leads to encouraging learners to use the foreign language to communicate. In Iranian schools, *rapport* is said to be very important, but it certainly does not at all lead to oral communication. It may lead to students obtaining better scores in the examinations and feeling secure in the classes.

Being well-dressed was brought up many times. This may seem in contrast with the code of dressing that is acceptable in public places in the country. The history of the country during the past century may be the reason for this attention to clothing. Until 1979, women who wished to cover their hair were banned from

having hijab. Then two years after the Islamic revolution in 1979, women and to some extent men were once again encouraged to observe the Islamic codes of dressing. Much attention has thus been paid to the way people should and should not dress. This may have made people too alert to the importance of their appearance or how they should dress and this may be the reason why students pay particular attention to their teacher's appearance. And language teachers' dress code, in particular, seems to attract even more attention.

Teachers' ability to speak fluently in English was another point to reflect upon. In Iran, the opportunity to use the language orally is very limited, so why did the students think it was necessary? To many Iranians, anybody who can speak English is knowledgeable and has the ability to read, write and understand the language as well. It is likely then that the students saw the teachers' ability to speak in English as a sign of teacher's knowledge and appreciated those who knew the language. Also, maybe Iranians are hoping to have more communication with other nations and feel that this can happen in the near future; and, therefore, believe that they need to improve their speaking. Now the question is, why then would they want to be taught English in Persian? They are probably worried that they will not understand and learn anything if the teacher only uses English.

One last point to consider concerns the teachers who were disliked by the students. All of the four teachers believed they were effective and seemed to be really interested in their jobs. Moreover, the students of one of the less-liked teachers made the most improvement in the test that was conducted during the study. Upon further investigation, it became evident the misinterpretation of the teachers' teaching style had been one of the main causes. This shows the value of effective communication between the teacher and the learners in determining teacher effectiveness and it may even suggest that changing perceptions in favour of a particular situation can happen through effective communication.

All in all, as Hall (2011, p. 4) says, "What goes on in a classroom is inevitably more than the logical and tidy application of theories and principles; it is localized, situation-specific, and, therefore, diverse." The findings of this study have once again proven that language teaching is a diverse experience and teachers have many roles and responsibilities. Learners should be able to trust their teachers; teachers, too, seem to need to trust themselves and feel efficacious. The students in this study did not see the syllabus and the teacher's roles in the class as two separate elements and believed that teachers could try to improve the syllabus.

Teachers' role is seen as vital in the success or failure of a system. I really hope that besides providing a concept of effectiveness, this study will be useful for teachers.

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