

# Gendered Teaching Identities and Chinese Undergraduate Students' Perceptions of Teacher Efficacy in the English Language Classroom.

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**Abstract:** This qualitative narrative study asked Chinese undergraduate students to identify characteristics of teacher effectiveness and whether or not gender affected an individual's teaching performance. The investigation raises questions about ways in which teachers' contemporary classroom practices are evaluated. The research findings not only challenge current market-oriented teacher competency models but also contradict previous studies concerning the effects of gender on teaching efficacy. The study revealed the teacher character traits that this particular cohort of students considered the most influential on their learning.

**Keywords:** Chinese students, competency, good teachers, narrative, neoliberalism

## 1. Introduction

A major preoccupation in social research both last century and more recently has been the effect of individual teachers on students' educational outcomes. Studies by Ginnott (1971), Hattie (2012), Jennings & Greenberg (2009) Lingard (2011) and McGrath & Van Bergen (2015) have all identified the teacher as the decisive element in the classroom. Kinder & Harland (2004) suggest that a teacher's personal approach is one characteristic that cannot be underestimated in relation to influencing the lives of students. Academic performance is responsive to the level of rapport a teacher is able to establish with individuals in his/her classes (Lee, 2012; McGrath & Van Bergen, 2015). Furlong (1991) also identified the everyday practices of teachers as a major factor affecting either positive or negative student learning. Most investigations into the concept of good teaching, over the last few decades, have been explored within a Western context (Al-Mahrooqi, Denman, Al-Siyabi & Al-Maamari, 2015). Notions of the good teacher however are subject to change over time both among and within cultures. For example, the introduction of constructivist teaching approaches in China are currently challenging the long-standing master-disciple relationship on which past Chinese learning was founded. As a consequence, Confucian traditions that assume mutual respect between teachers and their students have become more fluid in recent years (Connell, 2009; Tan, 2017).

Despite the breadth of research into teacher effectiveness there appears to be a paucity of information regarding the role gender might play in determining Chinese students' perceptions of teachers' efficacy. This qualitative narrative investigation asked the opinions of undergraduates studying foundation English at a Northwestern Chinese university what they considered to be the most important attributes of a 'good

teacher' and if a teacher's gender identification had any bearing on the students' points of view. The findings of this action research are intended to inform not only my own teaching practice but also further sociolinguistic study in the area of cross-cultural language education. *Effective, competent, excellent and proficient* are some words often used to describe good teachers. In this study, unless otherwise identified, these terms will be used interchangeably (Nasser, 2017).

## 2. Review of the Literature

**Rationale:** This review examines literature related to teacher effectiveness and evaluates its relationship to the present investigation. Every attempt has been made to provide a balanced argument with respect to the contested theoretical perspectives underpinning teacher competency identified in the literature. The general character of the review reflects the discovery orientation and inductive approach of qualitative work. This method reduces the possibility of earlier research limiting or predicting the findings of the current study (McMillan, 2004 p. 70).

In the sociology of education there is a perennial search for understanding the attributes of effective, good or competent teachers. Other than family it is the quality of teachers and their teaching that is said to be the most significant influence on students' schooling outcomes (Hayes, Mills, Christie & Lingard, 2006; OECD, 2005). Biddle & Ellena (1964) argue that knowing what constitutes teacher effectiveness or competency is so complex that a definitive answer is impossible. Hamachek (1969) says that research into teacher effectiveness tends to concentrate on a few specific criteria namely: a teacher's personality and conduct, personal characteristics, pedagogical approaches as well as a teacher's self-perception and the way he/she perceives others. Some common benchmarks also used to identify the good teacher include: one's reputation among peers and senior administrative staff, student performance on standardized tests and an individual's experience. These indicators however are contextually variable and as such not a reliable representation of teacher effectiveness (Mullock, 2003). Utley (1998) referred to the ideal teacher as: enthusiastic, approachable, willing to help and someone who encouraged students' independence. In China good teaching is equated with helping students obtain 'correct' answers from textbooks that have been endorsed by teachers and reproduced in end of course exams (Tan, 2017). Who or what constitutes a good teacher however differs according to demographic membership. For example, teachers' and students' perspectives of the good practitioner vary considerably. Batten, Marland, & Khamis (1993) demonstrated that students thought a teacher's capacity to explain concepts was significant whereas teachers themselves considered the same point to be of only minor relevance. Students also believed that friendliness, being helpful, empathy and understanding were important attributes of a competent teacher. Qualities that students neglected to mention but were identified as integral by teachers included classroom planning, structure and organization (Mullock, 2003). According to Harmer (1998) the most straightforward approach to understanding the qualities of a good teacher is that the individual cares more about students' learning than he/she does about his/her own teaching.

Research by Das & Das (2001) and Gumbiner (1998) identified gender as one of the main demographic variables associated with fostering a sense of affinity between students and their teachers. Data generated from multiple disciplines suggest female students have a preference for female teachers whereas male students on the other hand prefer male teachers (Riniolo, Johnson, Sherman & Misso, 2006). The researchers also found that a teacher's physical attractiveness significantly affected students' opinions of teacher performance. Miller & Chamberlin's (2000) study revealed that students consider male university teachers more professorial than their female counterparts the latter being relegated to the status of just a teacher. Anderson & Kanner's (2011) investigation showed that heterosexual teachers were looked upon more favourably by their students than lesbian and gay teachers due to perceived intolerance for differing political points of view (Riniolo et al. 2006). Socially-constructed stereotypes regarding gender roles persist and undoubtedly filter students' perceptions of teachers' classroom performance (Tindall & Walters, 2017). Mullock (2003) confirms many of the conclusions drawn by other studies concerning teacher efficacy. Most concur that good teachers possess experience, a range of strategies, abilities to improvise in planning and

interactive teaching as well as the capacity to solve problems that arise in the classroom. The review has identified some of the important concepts related to the notions surrounding ‘good teachers’ and intentionally drawn attention to those studies that I argue are most relevant to the following investigation (Lovett, 2014).

### 3. Methods

Although qualitative methods were the predominant means of collecting and analyzing data in this narrative study some demographic information required statistical analysis. The meaning of the participants’ written responses however depended on an interpretive-descriptive approach (Belenky, 1992; Maykut & Morehouse, 1994). The interpretivist paradigm, in which the point of view of the actor informs an understanding of social phenomena, was the primary means of collecting, analysing and interpreting the data (Weber, 1947). Data are written responses to the research questions: *In your opinion what are the characteristics of an effective or good English teacher? Is the level of a teacher’s competency affected by their gender (Yes/No)? Explain the reasons for your answer?* The way in which participants responded was informed by each individual’s personal experience and understanding of the research focus. To assume the responses provided by this participant sample are typical of all Chinese undergraduates is unrealistic. However, some of the opinions expressed by students in this study can be considered generalizable (McMillan, 2004).

Recruiting participants for the research relied on opportunistic sampling (Lovett, 2010) due to my accessibility to the respondents. I teach foundation English to this cohort. The participant sample consisted of two-hundred and five first-year undergraduate students from the disciplines: computing, engineering management, civil engineering and building intelligence. Three variables, used in the collection, analysis and interpretation of the data, were: age, gender and field of study. It should be acknowledged that a gender imbalance exists in the disciplines in which the participants are enrolled. That said the opinions of the thirty-one percent of females, represented among the sample, remain important despite the statistical disparity. Data were generated during orientation classes in November 2017. Individuals were encouraged to be candid when responding to the research questions. The data therefore can be regarded as plausible first-hand accounts. Participants’ confidentiality was ensured as all responses were anonymous (Lovett, 2010).

Ricoeur’s (1976) interpretation theory was used to analyze the participants’ written responses. Each narrative was examined for specific units of meaning. An initial or naïve reading was followed by an in-depth critical analysis. The written responses of each individual were studied for themes, a participant’s use of particular language and any inconsistencies in what a respondent had written (Lovett, 2010). Themes are conceptual labels aligned with events and other phenomena. They are abstract constructs that connect the expressions in the written responses to objects and images (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

### 4. Analysis

Preliminary analysis described all of the participants’ responses individually: interpretation of those responses occurred in the next stage of the study. Interpretation, although acknowledging each participant’s experiences and views separately, treated the themes collectively (Lovett, 2014). The analysis of the data did not set out to solve a specific problem. Both a literal and interpretive treatment of the data identified this student cohort’s personal opinions of good teachers. Characteristics of the students’ writing not discernible as Standard English were edited from responses. Removing grammatical inconsistencies reflects my concern about language and its capacity to label individuals. Imposing myself on the data enabled me to reduce any potential strictures of participants due to language (Lovett, 2010). The tenet of each student’s response however remains essentially intact (Fairclough, 1992). One characteristic identified among forty percent of the sample, but not apparent in the literature, was the importance of humor:

*In my opinion a good teacher should be friendly, funny and active and not treat students as subordinates. They should put students on an equal footing (Female, 18).*

*Teachers should be humorous, attractive and experienced (Female, 18).*

*A good teacher tells jokes in class and can arouse students' enthusiasm (Male, 20).*

*Characteristics of a good teacher are humor and patience (Male, 20).*

*Good English teachers create a positive classroom atmosphere with humor (Male, 18).*

*An effective English teacher should not only be knowledgeable but also humorous (Female, 18).*

*Good teachers use humor in the classroom (Female, 18).*

*I think it is the responsibility of a good teacher to cheer up the class with humor and always care for students no matter whether they are good or bad (Male 18).*

Another attribute recognized as important by thirty-five percent of respondents but not common in the literature was patience:

*A teacher not only needs to be good at communicating but they also need to be patient with students (Male, 19).*

*I think it's important for a good English teacher to have a nice character as well as be patient and optimistic about their students' learning (Female, 18).*

*Patience is important. Male teachers are good at inspiring but female teachers are more patient (Female, 18).*

*I think a responsible English teacher should be kind and patient with every student (Male, 18).*

*Patience and respect are important. Some students are a little shy and misunderstand what the teacher says. The teacher shouldn't get angry but get to know the students better and teach them according to their aptitude (Male, 18).*

*Language is a slow process. I want the teacher to be patient with me so we can achieve together. It would be wonderful (Male, 18).*

Ranked third among the sample was a teacher's knowledge and experience:

*To help students improve a good English teacher should be experienced and skillful. If he/she is humorous and has perfect pronunciation it will be even better (Male, 19).*

*I think an effective English teacher has a rich knowledge. They have good verbal and physical expression and recognize students' shortcomings. He/she understands how to use suitable and varied teaching methods according to our English level (Female, 18).*

Nineteen percent of the sample considered a teacher's friendliness to be a positive attribute:

*The teacher will be our friend and take the time to talk with us about anything. They will not only notice who we are but also want to know more about us (Female, 18).*

*I think good English teachers are friendly and enthusiastic (Male, 19).*

In response to question two, eighty-two percent of the sample believed that gender had no bearing on a teacher's competency:

*One's gender doesn't determine his/her skill level (Other, 19).*

*Being a good teacher comes from the heart not one's gender (Male, 18).*

*As far as I'm concerned the level of a teacher's competency is affected by age not gender. China has an old saying "The older you are the more knowledge you have" (Male, 18).*

*I think gender has no impact (Male, 18).*

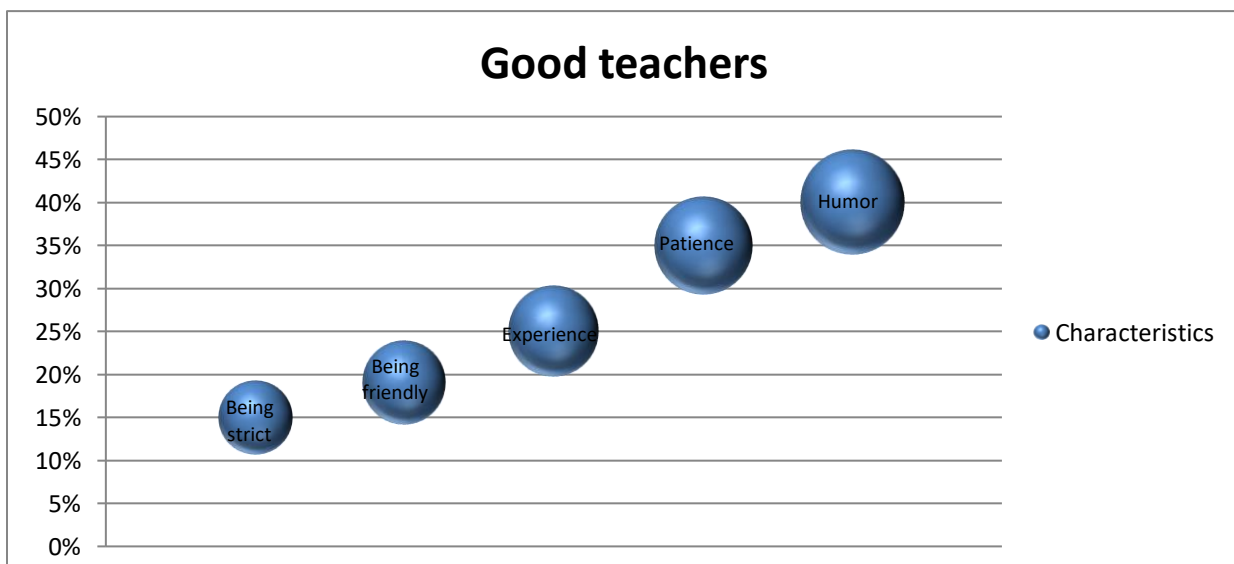
*It doesn't matter whether you're male or female. One's attitude makes them a great teacher (Female, 18).*

Of the eighteen percent who identified gender as an issue a majority consisted of males from the schools of: engineering management, civil engineering and building intelligence. No females from the computer discipline believed gender affected one's teaching performance:

*Male teachers' abilities are higher than females (Male, 20).*

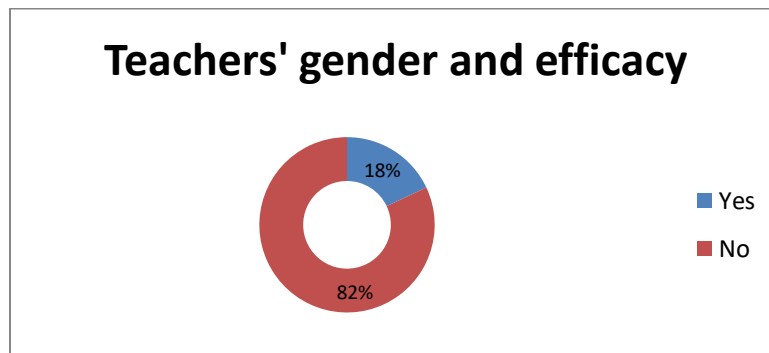
*Every woman has a mother's heart. They will give students more help than male teachers (Male, 19).*

*It's a terrible reality, women teachers are better than men in primary school. Male teachers however are more competent in university. Male nurses are not as good as females. Policemen are better than policewomen (Male, 19).*



**Fig.1** Student perceptions of teacher efficacy

The study has intentionally avoided any in-depth statistical analysis of the data. Such an approach would align the research with a reductionist rather than interpretivist paradigm. The aim of the narrative approach is to retain the essence of students' views in their own words. The data examples are indicative of the thoughts expressed by this student cohort. All the narrative responses and their graphical representation (**Figures 1 & 2**) illustrate the participants' personal opinions concerning: *Gendered teaching identities and perceptions of teacher efficacy*. The study has revealed a number of themes that not only concur with but also build on existing literature pertaining to good teachers. The literal and interpretive treatment of the data identified humor and patience as the most important attributes of a teacher's effectiveness. Characteristics such as knowledge and friendliness, although consistent with previous research findings, were considered less significant among this particular student sample. **Figure 2** reflects respondents' minimal support for the gender/efficacy relationship.



**Fig. 2** Gender/efficacy relationship

## 5. Discussion

The study provided Chinese undergraduates an opportunity to express their personal views about good teachers. The data demonstrate the difference in emphasis between the perspectives of this student cohort and traditional teacher competency models that drive education policies and teaching practices in many countries around the world (Connell, 2009). Groundwater-Smith (2008) suggests that students have a right to express their own views in relation to what and how they learn. Robertson (2006) agrees that a lot can be learned from students' views about effective teaching. In a number of educational jurisdictions, China included, those teachers who possess a narrow set of pedagogical skills that enable them to deliver tightly-controlled school curricula, are the individuals most likely to be considered good practitioners (Connell, 2009 p.217). The attributes identified by the students in this study are thus out of step with the auditable best practice competencies expected from most of these educational systems.

The responses of the participants in this study demonstrate that students recognize good teaching as more than a quantifiable checklist of achievement standards. Connell (2009) points out classrooms involve emotional work and on any given day teachers as well as students experience a range of emotions that can impact individuals' performances. The emphasis on accountability and evidenced-based instruction has affected teachers' professional autonomy. Increased standardization and uniformity has restricted the opportunity for teachers and their students to establish meaningful and worthwhile relationships. A teacher's value is too often correlated with their students' test results (Robertson, 2006 p.765). Who then advocates for those unquantifiable qualities such as humor, patience and friendliness identified by this study's respondents as attributes most representative of the good teacher? The responsibility according to Connell (2009) rests with teachers themselves who are best positioned to not only appreciate but also understand what is required to build positive learning environments.

As a teacher of more than forty years I am sensitive to the changeability of classroom cultures. My experience tells me that the generic competent teacher model is misguided. Social variations not only within, but also among school populations, are evidence that one size does not fit all.

This investigation also asked students to offer opinions about a teacher's gender identity and its relationship to teaching performance. Although many responses showed students viewed their teachers through a gendered lens, an overwhelming majority did not support the notion that gender affected one's teaching. This finding is at odds with gender discourses of masculinity and femininity that continue to influence everyday social practices (Taylor, 2004) and also contradicts evidence provided by Mengel, Sauermann & Zolitz (2018) and Tindall & Waters, (2017) that tertiary students do in fact see a correlation between teaching performance and a professor's gender.

## 6. Conclusion

This investigation reaffirms the role student/teacher relationships play in learning. Despite the unique educational experiences of every individual who participated in the research there was consensus among a significant number of the cohort regarding the concept of good teaching. The findings do not suggest that teachers abandon their own understanding and professional judgment of teaching to accommodate the opinions of their students. The research identifies the teacher characteristics that students consider the most significant to their learning. Strategies synchronizing students' points of view with those of the teacher have the potential to facilitate positive classroom experiences. Cooperative and inclusive classrooms promote the interests of teachers and students alike.

The investigation continues the debate concerning the philosophical and ideological perspectives underpinning current approaches to teaching and its evaluation. The research findings not only identified aspects of classroom practice to consider but also raised issues related to educational policy for possible further study. Only data collected from students are represented in the analysis. It is acknowledged that teachers' perspectives concerning good teaching may differ considerably from those expressed by students. As a consequence a sample of teachers has been recruited to enable a future comparative inquiry into both teachers' and students' points of view regarding the research focus. It is also suggested that a more extensive investigative approach might include in-depth interviews that have the potential to generate a greater range and depth of data.

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