

Learner Perspectives of Negative and Positive teacher Characteristics: A study

Iffat Ara Nasreen Majid*

Abstract

This study was conducted on 174 students from 3 different universities and four faculties to seek responses of learners on what they perceive as good and bad characteristics in teachers. The comments of the learners reveal not only pedagogic characteristics, but personality and behavioural ones as well that need to be taken seriously in order to establish rapport with the learners and enhance their motivation to learn.

Key words: positive, negative, characteristics, perception, teachers, learners, tertiary level

Classroom learning is a complicated process emerging from the interaction of multiple forces like values, beliefs, backgrounds and other individual differences of both the main actors viz. the teachers and the learners. The focus of this study is to find out from one of the principle actors in this process i.e. the learners, how they evaluate the other principal actor i.e. the teachers. The learner perspective is expected to shed light from the receiver's point of view. New methods may be proposed, materials developed and ideas floated to make learning successful but no tool will prove effective unless the teacher knows how to make the best use of it. One of the best means of finding out what goes into the making of a good teacher is to find out from the learners themselves who they consider to be good teachers.

Literature review

A lot of work has been done on what makes teaching effective in the school environment. However, these studies also provide insights for classrooms in general at more advanced levels as well. Berliner (1987) had put great emphasis on distinguishing between good teachers and effective teachers. He broadly defines effectiveness as the ability of a teacher to make their learners actually learn what they are expected to learn. An effective teacher is therefore one who is aware of and focused towards the teaching outcome. A good teacher on the other hand is one who follows all the correct procedures e.g. "starts a lecture on time, provides a review, gives an advance organizer, emphasizes important points, asks higher order questions throughout, cracks a good joke..."(p-94) but is not aware whether his/her students have actually learned. However he emphasizes that these two concepts need not be mutually exclusive. He claims that most researchers study effectiveness from a narrowed down perspective by checking on learners, test

* Associate Professor, Institute of Modern Languages, Dhaka University.

performance on that course, but Berliner opts for a broader perspective. According to him an effective teacher:

- provides his/her students with the opportunity to attain the knowledge and skill that they are expected to acquire;
- makes sure that the desired outcomes are also what is expected in the curriculum;
- provides the learners the opportunity to learn what they are supposed to learn.

Providing them with the opportunity to learn is something understood differently by different teachers. Berliner therefore comments:

“ For reasons we do not yet fully understand some teachers do not yet perform this task well” (p-97)

He further talks about Academic Learning Time (ALT) which is “that part of allocated time in which students are engaged with materials or activities related to the outcome measures that are being used and in which students experience a high success rate” Students of effective teachers have high ALT because these teachers find ways to ensure that the allocated time and the actual time students are engaged in learning the material are sufficient for learning, and the materials used would also be conducive to high rate of success.

However one variable that is considered most important in achieving learner success is that of Individual Learner Differences (Ellis 1994). This concept identifies the fact that all learners should not and cannot be treated the same way as they differ according to beliefs, intelligence, motivation, learning styles, cognitive styles, etc. and thereby do not respond in the same way to particular teaching techniques. However, Hofmeister and Lubke(1990) claim that it is not a fact that the source of all differences is the learner who comes to the class carrying it, but that the classroom situation, the nature of instruction also contributes to creating it or further aggravating it. Teachers contribute to creating individual learner difference by giving messages of high expectation through allowing participation or providing feedback and low expectation by not providing these opportunities to learners they dislike. Teacher perspective differences are also reported by sociologist Roland Meighan’s (in Williams and Burden 1997 pages 57-58) categorization of the way learners are viewed by the teachers. These were as:

- 1) *resisters* (2) *receptacles* (3) *raw materials* (4) *clients*
(5) *partners* (6) *individual explorers* (7) *democratic explorers.*

Teachers’ behaviour with learners and their method of teaching would therefore consequently also vary with the way they viewed their learners.

William and Burden (p-60) also refer to Gow & Kember’s (1993) comprehensive review of literature on conceptions held by different teachers of how learning takes place.

They identify several different conceptions e.g.

- a quantitative increase in knowledge
- memorization
- acquisition of facts, procedures, etc.

They refer to Pine and Boy's perception that a "teacher's personal and emotional structure is experienced by the class much earlier than they get to feel their intellectual ability." They are also of the opinion that a teacher's personality is also revealed by the way a teacher treats his/her learners e.g. a teacher with low self esteem would also lack the ability to build the self esteem of his pupils.

Meyer and Turner (2002) studied the role of emotion in motivating learners and came to the conclusion that emotions are an important motivational contributor. Emotions are "intertwined" in the way teachers respond to instructional situations and the beliefs and actions of the learners which are an integral part of the classroom context. They found that classes that comprised highly involving interactions provide positive emotional support (Goldstein 1999; Wood et al. 1976; Meyer and Lubke 2002). Their research also supported the fact that teacher's actions work as indicators of practices, beliefs and values that control emotions, motivation and cognition (e.g. Stipek et. al, 1998; Urda Kneisel & Mason 1999; Vermont & Verloop 1999 Meyer and Lubke 2002). Their findings suggested that for learning to take place contexts rich in cognitive support were necessary but not sufficient to bring about involvement in the learning process.

An earlier study by Dill & Associates(1990) also supported the fact that focus on merely cognitive factors and teaching strategies was not sufficient. Social and emotional factors also tended to have "profound importance in children's learning. They also noted the fact that most teachers do not have a sufficient knowledge base of the relationship of different types of questioning to student learning. They found that due to lack of adequate training most teachers' questioning patterns were not challenging or provocative enough to test learner knowledge.

Reporting on his research on the nature of an enthusiastic teacher Peng Ding (2008) reports that he found teachers who were enthusiastic, had an extreme intrinsic interest in the subject matter. According to him the result of this enthusiasm was twofold:

- it is infectious- makes others around them also enthusiastic
- one individual teacher may transit enthusiasm differently from the other depending on the culture of their native country.

He found enthusiastic teachers shared 5 core attributes:

1. Intrinsic interest in the subject;
2. Caring for student learning;
3. Sound subject knowledge;
4. Passion for teaching;
5. Genuineness (congruence) and rapport (interaction) with the students.

Joachim Appel (1995 p-11) talks about the importance of the ability to control classes which he considers of vital importance in order to make the learning environment more conducive to learning. He identifies this as a variable ability as teachers having lower abilities soon become fatigued with the burden of teaching unwilling learners.

Prodromous (1992) gives an interesting list of qualities of good and bad teachers collected from a survey conducted on 40 Cambridge First Certificate Learners who were asked to write the qualities of (a) a good teacher and (b) a bad teacher. A close look at his list reveals teacher variables under the following categories:

1. Attitude towards learners
2. Attitudes towards teaching
3. Ways of interpreting teaching methodology
4. Personality traits
5. Educational background.

Directions from these studies will be taken into consideration while analyzing results of the present study.

Methodology of the study

The study sought to find answers to the research question:

Q. What kind of teacher characteristics do learners at the tertiary level perceive as positive and what characteristics do they perceive as negative?

The data was collected from 174 students from 3 different universities, 2 in the private sector where teachers have comparatively higher accountability and 1 from the largest and the most reputed in the public sector where teachers enjoy greater freedom so far job accountability is concerned. The respondents are all undergraduate students from the faculties of Science, Arts, Law and Business Studies. The break down of respondents is shown in the following table:

Table 1: Distribution of respondent sampling

Public Univ.	Private 1	Private 2
Business Admin. 45	Business Admin. 16	Business Admin 22
Arts 21	Arts 18	Science 22
	Law 14	
	Science 16	
Total 66	64	44

The sampling was to some extent convenient sampling as the departments selected were chosen on the basis of accessibility of the researcher for data collection. The respondents had all completed at least one full semester (3-4 months) in their institutions and some were also in their 7th semester.

Data was collected by means of a questionnaire that had 4 open questions. The first two questions asked the respondents to identify which teachers' classes they liked most and why and which teachers' classes they disliked most and why. The learners were asked to identify these teachers so that they would have something to directly relate to and reflect. The next two questions asked them to write what teacher characteristics they found motivating and what teacher characteristics they found de-motivating. These questions did not necessarily need them to refer to their current situations. They allowed the learners to reflect on their past learning experiences as well. The questions were not given in the form of a checklist to select the characteristics they preferred in order to avoid any effect of the questionnaire by putting ideas into their heads. Totally open questions had the advantage of initiating a process of brainstorming. Learners wrote the first things that came to their heads as the questionnaires were given in classes and were asked to complete within a given limited time. The results were therefore a rich collection of experiences and opinions all of which came from the learners themselves and the research tool could not have any role in influencing their responses. As the respondents are from the tertiary level their responses are expected to be more mature and reflective than those of school students.

Data presentation & discussion

It was found that the learners mostly repeated or included comments from the first 2 questions to answer the next two questions. This indicates that the questionnaire design produced the desired effect by helping the learners make their comments against concrete examples in mind and some of them even mentioned personal negative and positive experiences. Although responses were collected from 4 different disciplines viz. Science(Computer Science and Electronic Engineering), Arts(Literature, Language and Islamic History), Law and Business Administration, the responses were fairly consistent and could be grouped under similar categories. There was no marked difference that could be specified as more specific to public universities or private universities either. The reliability of the study comes from the fact that although the questionnaires were the same, the groups of learners had no contact with each other. Moreover, each group did mention dislike or liking for more or less the same teachers which proves that the responses were not idiosyncratic. When the majority of a group likes a particular teacher or dislikes particular ones they cannot be considered idiosyncratic or whimsical. Copying from each other would also be ruled out as learners filled in the questionnaires in the presence of their class teachers and were given and taken back at the same time. The responses of the learners can be categorized under the following headings as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Positive and negative teacher characteristics as perceived by the learners

Teacher characteristics	
Positive	Negative
Handling of content	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -makes lecture interesting – 36 (learners) -gives real life example: 14 (learners) -plenty of examples -relates to current issues -makes things easy to understand: 27 -gives many knowledge outside of books-2 -gives lots of information -teaches new things -expressing thoughts that match with the students -focuses conceptualization -logical well structured -interesting explanation -has the attitude that no material is difficult -teaches innovatively, not preaches -makes boring subject interesting -tells interesting stories to inspire students -tries to make students understand -ensures that everyone can catch up with the lesson -prepares properly for lectures gives interesting assignments -makes learning fun- 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -repetitive subject matter -not creative and scientific -teaches unimportant and unnecessary things: 2 -silly lectures like school teachers -content old (did not feel like learning anything new) -considers himself/herself the best, we do not know anything: -keeps teaching the course by using difficult - terms -doesn't explain properly -makes us write weird stuffs -does not encourage group participation -does not allow asking questions: 3 -rigid during classroom interaction -no interactive teaching -encourages memorization: 7 -enforces personal style -complicated: 12 -difficult to understand: 15
Presentation skill	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -attractive interaction style -good communication skill -lively - 4 -humorous -18 -voice loud and clear: 4 -speaks fluently -knows good English -good presentation skill: 2 -teaches carefully: 6 -teaches clearly: 3 -precise delivery 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -inappropriate presentation of course materials -incapable of communicating: 5 -unenthusiastic method -traditional type of teaching -too fast: 2 -students attend class out of fear, not attraction teaching Bad: 9 -boring: 16 -uninteresting style: 4 -lacks confidence -low voice: 3 -cannot understand speech -doe not change tone (monotonous): 2 -speaks too fast -lazy and inactive

Other teaching related characteristics	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -completes course -regular- 3 -very responsible -dedicated- 2 -completes exam syllabus -punctual -fair grading -2 -takes class tests properly - has good class control -has positive attitude towards teaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -irregular: 2 -not punctual: 4 -canceling a scheduled class (without prior notice) too many unannounced quizzes -gives low grades -overly strict grading: 5 -unfair grading: 4 -does not give suggestions for exams -tries to make exam unnecessarily difficult -gives bad grades despite hard work
Subject knowledge	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -good subject knowledge -15 -doesn't teach from books only -can answer learner questions -always tries to answer learner questions -should be able to give inner meaning of a course - 2 -should be able to give critical explanation -teacher should be able to give some extra information and not just teach the syllabus 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - bookish -doesn't know much, tries to show off -lack of confidence in himself -should have in-depth knowledge of subject material concept -theory classes have no logic -shallow representation of the course -ignorant but dominating -teacher learned, but doesn't want to share with us -explains at surface level, briefly not elaborately, gives summary only -have limited knowledge
Personality attributes	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -friendly- 89 - cooperative-20 -good looking – 4 -hardworking - nice and easy going -active person -easy to talk to -patient -flexible 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - gentle - kind - well behaved- 6 - cool frank - 4 -smart - 4 - ethical - generous -helpful -5
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -moody/ unpredictable -dictatorial -bad tempered: 6 -authoritative: 4 -arrogant: 6 -self cantered -not articulate -not helpful 2 - paranoid (that student are after them) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - grumpy - not modest - uptight - irresponsible
Dealing with learners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -shows way of studying in an interesting way -inspiring - 4 -knows how to make us work hard -can easily persuade us -strict yet flexible -allows SS questioning 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -unnecessarily critical -makes pessimistic remarks -threatens to fail S -makes fun of SS: 3 -excessively formal: 2 -not understanding: 2 -cannot share problems with them: 5

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -focuses teaching rather than exams and grading 3 -completes exam syllabus -ensures class participation -gives ideas about career -ability to understand what learners want -helps overcome problems of learners -feels like friend guide and philosopher -gives equal importance to all students -fair towards learners-3 -listens to learners-2 -approachable during office hours -has power to convince -understands the amount of pressure learners can handle -gives constructive criticism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -not ready to hear if a learner can't understand -behaves badly: 12 -insults without any reason: 7 -doesn't want to understand students - biased: 9 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ towards female students: 3 ▪ towards learners who can perform well ▪ dislikes particular students: 2 ▪ considers SS bad -too strict: 36 -underestimates students: 2 -tries to show off: 2 -expects too much from SS
Attitude towards learners	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -friendly -105 -encouraging-8 -cooperative 22 -not condescending -forgiving -appreciating -caring 2 -helpful-5 -understanding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -unfriendly: 32 -rude: 19 -rough: 4 -rigid: 2 -not encouraging 2

Table 3: Outcomes of effective and ineffective teaching

Positive	Effect of teaching	Negative
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -lecture feels important -students feel they have learnt something -positive attitude to teaching - feel inspired to study and do good things 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -do not like the subject: 6 -I am weak -useless course: 7 -subject difficult: 3 -boring subject -cannot be inspired to study - demoralising 	

The categories shown in Tables 1 and 2 will now be discussed in detail.

Handling of content: The comments of the learners clearly reveal a strong attraction towards teachers who can make contents cognitively easy to grasp. This is focused by the mention of 27 learners that they like teachers who make things easy to understand, and teachers who make lectures interesting (36 learners) Conceptualization would take place only if students understand what the teacher intends to convey. Teaching by giving

a lot of examples from real life situations have therefore, been considered an attractive quality of good teachers by 14 learners. However the comment that good *teachers express thoughts that match with the learners* bears more meaning if we look at the following comments regarding teachers who are not considered good because they:

- teach unimportant and unnecessary things;
- give silly lectures like school teachers;
- consider/s himself the best, we don't know anything;
- make/s us write weird stuffs.

Clearly teachers in these cases have failed to assess what method of teaching would appeal to the learners, convey to them the objectives of the content and in what ways they would relate to cognitive advancement. The comment by Berliner that effective teachers are consciously focused towards learning outcomes bears a great deal of significance in this context. Moreover, student preference for cognitive development and something new comes out in comments like:

- teaches new things;
- gives many knowledge outside of books;
- gives lots of information;
- content old (did not feel like I learnt anything new).

When learners find things are relevant and adding to their knowledge they would naturally be attracted to the subject matter.

Presentation skills: In case of the ability to present materials, a good number of respondents 18 (%) have mentioned humour as a preferred ability while in the negative characteristics 16 (%) have found their teacher's presentations as boring. The ability to make a presentation attractive through liveliness and humour are therefore very important abilities. Other factors that could actually make even a well prepared lesson unattractive are:

- too fast (pace of teaching)
- low voice (mentioned by 3 respondents)
- does not change tone (speaking in a monotonous way)
- speaks too fast
- lazy and ineffective.

“Too fast” and “speaks too fast” relate to the pace of delivery. Teachers need to check on the effect of their presentations through re-inforcement questions like “Is it clear?” “Did you understand?” etc. They need to be conscious of the ability levels of the majority of their learners (individual learner differences). The other factors of low voice (volume) and monotonous nature of speaking are features that need to be consciously rectified through training. These are physical problems that can also be addressed by using microphones, breaking up long speeches into shorter stretches, asking questions to

students and other forms of interaction with students that make it less boring and difficult to concentrate. The mention of traditional type of teaching in Bangladesh in tertiary level classes, refer to purely lecture methods that are usually not attractive and difficult to retain learner attention. Five(5) students have commented that their teachers are incapable of communicating. This refers to the ability to explain things in a manner appropriate to the level of the learner, and making the main features of their lectures stand out. This is obvious by comments like:

- teaches carefully (6 respondents)
- teaches clearly (3 respondents)
- precise delivery
- focuses conceptualization

as positive traits in a teacher.

Subject Knowledge: 15 students have identified good subject knowledge as a positive characteristic of a teacher. How they can assess a teacher's subject knowledge becomes evident by the following comments:

- doesn't teach from books only
- can answer learner questions
- always tries to answer learner questions
- should be able to give critical explanation
- should be able to give some extra information and not just teach the syllabus.

A teacher without sufficient knowledge and clear concept about the subject will hardly be able to answer learner questions. This aspect is further highlighted in the section on **Dealing with learners** where a number of students have complained about the teacher not encouraging/allowing questioning or interaction in the class.

Teachers who lack sufficient knowledge try to cover it up by other means which the learners have pointed out as :

- ignorant but tries to portray as learned
- ignorant but dominating.

Other results of shallow knowledge of a teacher are :

- explains at surface level briefly, not elaborately, gives summary only
- shallow representation of the course.

However, despite being knowledgeable a teacher's teaching can still be unattractive to students which becomes evident by the following comment

- the teacher is learned but doesn't want to share with us.

This comment is directly related to comments like

- underestimates students
- consider himself the best, we do not know anything

These comments emphasize the fact that cognitive elements in the classroom are “intertwined” with emotional elements (as discussed before).

Other teaching related behaviour: This category has been identified as separate from the categories of Handling of Content and Presentation skills as it identifies issues that are more administrative in nature. These can be further classified into two categories viz.

- (1) related to classes
 - punctuality
 - class regularity (i.e. not rescheduling frequently)
 - class control
- (2) Relating to exams
 - grading
 - completing exam syllabus
 - taking tests properly
 - frequency of tests.

A number of students (11) expressed dissatisfaction over their teacher’s practice of grading. Those who talked about grading being unfair found it so due to overly strict marking (6 respondents) and one person considered it unfair because he got low grades despite hard work. This draws our attention to the fact that teachers need to talk to the learners about what they expect from their learners in the exams. As tests are one of the principal means of assessing student learning and ability it is important that learners have the proper orientation about the nature of expectation each teacher has from the learners which may not be the same. There is a clear evidence of an existing gap between teacher and learner expectations from the exams.

Dealing with the learners: This category of responses has been very revealing in how learners react to teacher behavior. In many cases the teachers may not even be aware that they might be hurting the learners’ feelings. The responses in this category broadly fall into two groups:

- (a) showing understanding: (relevant comments)
 - ability to understand what learners want
 - help overcome problems
 - give equal importance to all students
 - fair towards learners
 - understands the amount of pressure learners can handle
 - strict yet flexible
- (b) problem solving
 - listens to learners
 - has power to convince
 - can easily persuade us
- (c) guiding

- gives constructive criticism
- shows way of studying in an interesting way
- gives ideas about career
- knows how to make us work hard
- inspiring (4 resp.)

The negative aspects on the other hand can broadly be divided into three categories :

(1) Making learners feel bad

- insults without any reason -7 (resp.)
- unnecessarily critical
- makes pessimistic remarks
- makes fun of students -3 (resp.)
- threatens to fail students

(2) Inability to show understanding and establish rapport

- excessively formal-2 (resp.)
- not understanding -2 (resp.)
- cannot share problems with them (the teachers)
- doesn't want to understand the students
- too strict – 36 (resp.)

(3) Unfairness

- bias-9 (resp.)
- punishes without finding facts
- unfair in grading

The other characteristics that the learners have found negative are about teachers who:

- like flattery
- tries to show off - 2 (resp.)

These comments show how careful teachers need to be about the way they behave in front of the learners and in what ways their actions might be interpreted.

Attitude towards learners: In this category what is most noticeable is that fact that **105** respondents cited **friendliness** as a very positive characteristic of a good teacher. A friendly attitude would automatically ensure all the positive aspects that have been mentioned in “dealing with learners” category. The next largest number of respondents considered **cooperativeness** (mentioned by 22 respondents) as an important characteristic of a good teacher. This aspect would ensure that teachers are more open to learner demands, their needs and showing consideration in dealing with their individual problems. In the negative sector also unfriendliness turns out to be mentioned by a large number of students. This unfriendliness would also include behaviour like being rude (mentioned by 19 respondents) and behaving badly (mentioned by 12).

Personality trait: In this category the negative aspects appear to be pretty revealing although not surprising as “**bad tempered**” “**arrogant**” and “**authoritative**” teachers

are not infrequent to come by, however the idea of teachers who are **paranoid** (who think that the students are after them) would directly relate to learner mishandling to an extreme level. An investigation into the background of these teachers (who could be traced as their names were mentioned in the answer to the first question) revealed that although mentioned by only two students here, these teachers had the most problems in getting learner cooperation and had complained that whole groups of learners in particular classes were unmanageable ones. However, the same groups had also praised teachers teaching other courses to them. It can therefore be safely implied that the other teachers had not only been able to control them but had in fact managed to impress them as well. If a teacher fails to establish rapport with the students, s/he stands the chance of losing control over the class and might receive negative responses from the learners as well. Comments like “condescending”, “forgiving”, “appreciating” are clear indicators of the emotional element in teacher student relationship that needs to be very carefully handled. However, not only the internal qualities but also the external qualities appear to have an impact on the learners as evident by their preferences for teachers who are **smart** (mentioned by 4 learners) and **good-looking** (mentioned by 4 learners).

Effects of teaching: Some of the responses that do not fit in as teacher attributes but are nevertheless useful, revealing results of good and bad teaching, have been put together separately as effects of teaching. Evidently when a teacher is effective there is a profound change in the learner which comes out in their comments like:

- lecture feels important
- I feel that I have learnt something
- I feel inspired to do great things

On the other hand teachers who fail to make their teaching effective have a negative impact on their learner. Interestingly the learner in this case does not dislike the teacher but finds fault with the course/subject itself. This is evident by their comments like:

- do not like the subject (6 resp.)
- I am weak
- useless course 7 (resp.)
- subject difficult 3 (resp.)
- boring subject
- cannot be inspired to study

The main objective of teaching thus gets defeated by the learners developing strong inhibition towards a subject and the course. Such learners would hence be very difficult to motivate to learn.

Conclusion

The study provided a rich collection of negative and positive characteristics of teachers in general as viewed by the learners irrespective of what subject they teach. It can be used as a reference point to conduct further research on each of the categories that have emerged and further classifying them at macro and micro levels. It can also provide useful insight to subject teachers as a checklist against which to evaluate their own teaching and behaviour as teachers which are evidently equally important both from the cognitive and emotional point of view. A teacher should be someone a learner can look up to who as one respondent put it “feels like a friend guide and philosopher”. Further research in this area comprising of a much larger sample group can be conducted to see if the responses with higher frequency counts still produce the same pattern and also categories that have single responses also come up with higher frequencies. Nevertheless this study has good prospects of supporting further research in this area.

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