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Exploring Learners' Beliefs of Good English Teachers through a Multimodal Investigation

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Introduction

Among the many contextual features which influence how students learn, learners' expectations of English teachers are particularly significant. Commonly held ideas about 'good' teachers can influence learner attitudes and motivation (Brown, 2009). The notion of good teachers implies more than having a set of certain skills and knowledge; it is complex and multidimensional (Zhunussova, 2019). Furthermore, if teachers are not aware of students' expectations of good English teachers, this can potentially lead to learners' withdrawal from studying English. Thus, examining learners' beliefs is important because of potential influence that beliefs have on learning behavior. However, despite this importance of investigating learners' beliefs of good English teachers, considerable attention has been on qualities of teachers imposed top-down by policy makers in the form of evaluation lists. There are few studies which focus on what it means to be a good English teacher as perceived by learners in English as a foreign language (EFL) contexts. As recognized in second language research (Barkhuizen, Benson & Chik, 2014), examining beliefs is methodologically difficult because they represent implicit unconscious schema which are problematic to access. Traditionally, research on learners' beliefs employed quantitative surveys but scholars call for alternative approaches which would apply more innovative research methods for better understanding of learners' beliefs (Kalaja Alanen & Dufva, 2008).

To address these research needs the present study complements interview data elicitation with a less conventional visual method to address the complexity of capturing learners' beliefs. Drawing on this innovative combination of research instruments, this research adds to the diversity of English learning communities with insights from a relatively under-researched context to promote better English learning and teaching informed by empirical evidence based on analyses of 100 student interviews and drawings. Unlike most studies conducted in primary and secondary schools within North American and European settings, this study explores beliefs of good English teachers in higher education from the perspective of university students in Kazakhstan, a former Soviet country in Central Asia.



Literature Review

In the last few decades much work has been done to examine qualities of good teachers (Arthur, Kristjánsson, Cooke Brown & Carr, 2015). However, the research focus was not discipline specific, creating a need for studies on good English teachers conducted within EFL contexts.

According to the review of empirical studies (Zhumussova, 2019), an EFL teacher can be characterized from different angles including personality traits, pedagogic skills, technical knowledge, classroom management and teacher-student relationships. Cortazzi, Jin, Kaivanpanah & Nemati (2015) point out that although good English teachers' qualities obviously include the mentioned features, contextual or cultural factors may influence how the features are realized in classroom contexts globally and emphases in expectations of good English teachers vary from one sociocultural context to another. Thus, there is a need for more studies on diverse cultural contexts to draw a better picture of global English practices (Canagarajah, 2012).

Furthermore, being a good English teacher is not merely having a set of requisite knowledge but involves understanding what being a good teacher means (Cortazzi et al., 2015). Research on Kazakhstani learners' beliefs (Makhanova & Cortazzi, 2013) found that "being knowledgeable" was most expected from good EFL teachers. However, further qualitative analysis revealed that this quality did not only mean knowledge of English but also extended to being erudite and knowing about fields beyond the language. This study demonstrated the importance of choosing the appropriate methodology which would capture such a complex notion of learners' beliefs. While interviews remain established, only a few studies adopted a visual method to investigate learners' beliefs. Scarce empirical evidence (Weber & Mitchell, 1995; Kalaja et al., 2008) illustrates that using participant-drawn images to explore learners' expectations can tap different cognitive and affective areas of participants' thinking, thus, providing a fuller research perspective on the topic of investigation. Yet, few studies have been conducted which use drawings as a data collection tool to examine learners' expectations of good English teachers.

Furthermore, although researchers highlight that students' beliefs are linked to the social and cultural context of language learning (Arthur et al., 2015), learners' views in many settings are still to be heard: Kazakhstan is among them. Thus, this study seeks to address the above gaps by answering the research question: What are key the features of good English teachers' attributes expected by Kazakhstani students of non-English majors?

Methods

This study is part of the larger project on students' and teachers' expectations of good English teachers in Kazakhstan. The specific dataset presented here is drawn from student interviews complemented with their drawings. Following the ethical approval from the UK-based institution, 100 Kazakhstani undergraduate students from various universities agreed to participate in this study. Table 1 gives information on the research participants.

TABLE 1
Research Participants' Majors and Gender (N=100)

Field of study			Gender	
Sociology	Economics	International Relations	Males	Females
25	49	26	39	61

The semi-structured interviews consisted of two stages. In Stage 1 the participants were interviewed about their views of good English teachers in Kazakhstan, then in Stage 2 the students were invited to draw an image of a good English teacher accompanied with an explanation of drawing.

Each interview was recorded and lasted about one hour. Then the data were transcribed and translated. As a bilingual speaker of Kazakh and Russian I conducted the interviews in Kazakh or Russian depending on the language choice of the bilingual participants. The transcriptions were sent to the participants for confirmation and to clarify unclear points of the interviews. The students were also invited to follow-up interviews but due to the examination period only twenty students agreed to be interviewed again as well as to discuss the preliminary analysis and interpretation of the data.

The thematic content analysis of the data involved inductive, comparative, iterative and interactive procedures (Silverman, 2015). Each interview was analyzed in several steps: first, Stage 1 data were carefully reviewed followed by examining the drawing from the point of what was depicted and the participant's commentary on the drawing. Then Stage 1 and Stage 2 data were compared in terms of differences and commonalities. The analytical stages of content analysis started with codes to label ideas highlighted by each participant which was followed by categorizing teachers' roles and qualities. Based on these recurrent items found in the whole dataset the five themes emerged.

In the data sets, the research participants are coded with the letter S followed by the assigned number.

Results

This section first reports the results of the students' interview and visual data analyses, followed by the discussion of salient features found only in the visual data.

The examination of the most important qualities conceived of a good English teacher suggests the following five dimensions: cognitive, affective, social, moral, and aesthetic. Table 2 shows how the five dimensions are derived from the students' sample quotes. The analyses revealed that the identified dimensions are interrelated and a good English teacher is perceived along several interconnected dimensions. The salient features of each dimension are discussed next.

TABLE 2

Themes from Students' Interview and Visual Data Analyses (N=100)

Dimensions	Teachers' qualities quoted verbatim	Number of interviews with emphasis on the features
Cognitive	<i>with a very deep knowledge of English, very intelligent, erudite, well-educated, teaches interesting lessons, gives answers immediately without thinking, knows a lot more than the knowledge of English, knows a lot about cultures of Britain and USA</i>	100
Affective	<i>creates a friendly environment, motivates students, doesn't shout, doesn't criticise,</i>	100
Social	<i>sociable, on good terms with students, like a friend, organises events outside class, on equal terms with students</i>	93
Moral	<i>could approach her with non-academic issues, an example, very devoted and gives her everything</i>	89

Aesthetic	<i>role model uses beautiful phrases, wore her clothes beautifully graceful, shows how beautiful English is</i>	49
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Cognitive Dimension

Every participant emphasised that a good English teacher is "highly knowledgeable" which embodies such features as a) knowledge and high competence in English, b) knowing how to teach English, c) being erudite and knowing about "cultures of English-speaking countries" illustrated through sample quotes:

A good English teacher knows English very well, has rich vocabulary and speaks perfect English like a native speaker (S7)

A good English teacher can answer every question, give translations, can explain why they have certain cultural traditions, so they should know about history of those countries. She/he shouldn't say "I don't know" (S17)

The importance of cognitive aspects is also highlighted in prior research on good English teachers in Kazakhstan (Zhunussova et al., 2021), China (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996) and Iran (Cortazzi et al., 2015).

Affective dimension

The analysis suggests that the affective dimension relating to emotions and feelings associated with expectations of good English teachers is as important as the above discussed cognitive dimension. As one of the students highlighted:

You can be highly knowledgeable, know everything about English but if you don't smile in class, then what's the use of that knowledge. We have such walking encyclopedias, but they can't motivate students with boring lessons. And on the contrary, if you know little, your smile doesn't help either. (S25)

This quote shows that cognition and emotion are closely linked as suggested in second language research (Barkhuizen et al., 2014) but previous studies often overlooked examining the affective dimension as related to other dimensions of learning English important for better understanding of learning and teaching.

The evidence also indicates that the teacher is expected to be "inspiring, positive, optimist, enthusiast" and "to create a positive atmosphere, so that students aren't afraid of the teacher and aren't afraid to make mistakes".

A fear of making mistakes was mentioned in almost every interview in this research. This feature is arguably due to the authoritative role of the teacher which was prevalent in the former Soviet educational system (Makhanova & Cortazzi, 2013) and recognized by some of the students:

... back in those days teachers were so dominant, students were afraid of them, afraid to speak because of mistakes. But nowadays we still have such teachers because they lived in that period (S23)

According to the students, such negative feelings hinder learning significantly and a good English teacher is expected to build a learning environment that motivates learning English.

Social Dimension

As expressed by most participants, it is important that a good English teacher should "organize events beyond the classroom", "celebrate holidays of the USA and UK as part of learning English", "spend time together with students" and be "like friends with students". Arguably, the participants expect these teaching practices because there "shouldn't be a distance between a teacher and students", "a teacher shouldn't be like a figure above you, we should be equal" (S13) and "you can trust her. It's good to go out and practice English in normal everyday life places. We could learn English not only in class but also socialize with our English teacher" (S5).

This expectation is perhaps another impact of Soviet educational practices when there was a considerable social distance between a teacher and learners (Burkhalter & Shegebayev, 2012).

Moral Dimension

The moral dimension is another important theme derived from the students' data analysis. Arguably, the moral dimension of the students' expectations in this study can be linked to the Soviet heritage. In the Soviet ideology the major aim of education was the notion of vospitaniye which can be conveyed as upbringing and character education of Soviet members (Halstead, 1994). Thus, teachers in this aim of achieving the ideal society were held as role models who pursued values of this ideal society. Although, Kazakhstan is no longer a Soviet country, teachers are still viewed as "models", "examples", "who teach about what is right and what is wrong" as expressed in the following quote.

A good teacher should be an example for students. Because students spend most of their time at school, they should see good examples of values. Teachers are responsible for future generations, so if they're good examples, then the next generation will be good. (S40)

Overall, most participants emphasize this significant impact of good English teachers on learners' personal growth.

Aesthetic Dimension

The moral dimension considered above was part of "ethical and aesthetical upbringing" ideology of the Soviet Union (Halstead, 1994) in which the aesthetic aspect of the Soviet ideals was highlighted through such public slogans as "Beauty saves the world" and "everything ought to be beautiful about a human being: the face, the clothes, the soul, the thoughts." Arguably, these ideas are still present in modern Kazakhstan as the evidence suggests. Thus, the teacher's perceived qualities can be viewed within the aesthetic dimension which is a salient feature for the participants because a good English teacher "shows beauty of the language" and "unpacks beauty of learning English for students". Besides conceptualizing learning and English in aesthetic terms, a good English teacher's manners, appearance and interaction are also "graceful", "beautiful", "eloquent" as mentioned by almost half of the students.

Visual Data

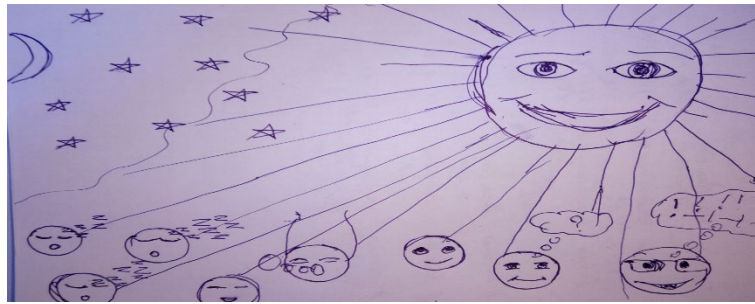


Figure 1. Student's drawing (S43).



Figure 2. Student's drawing (S 99).

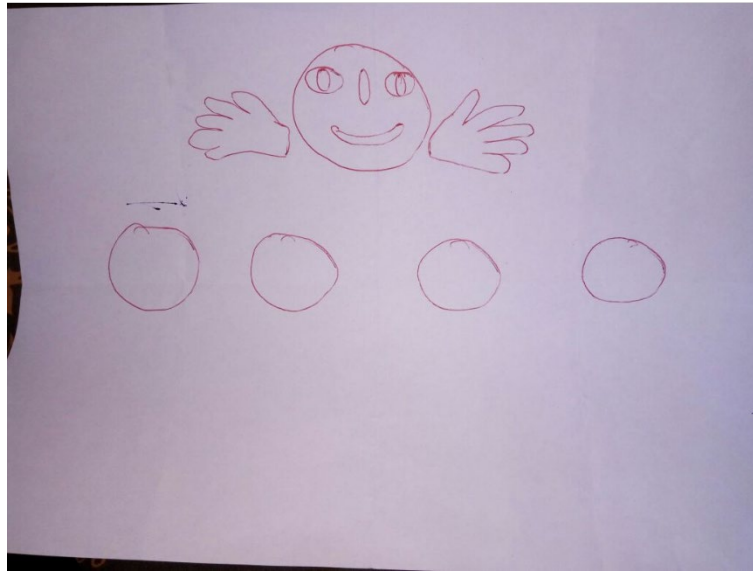


Figure 3. Student's drawing (S31).



Figure 4. Student's drawing (S68).

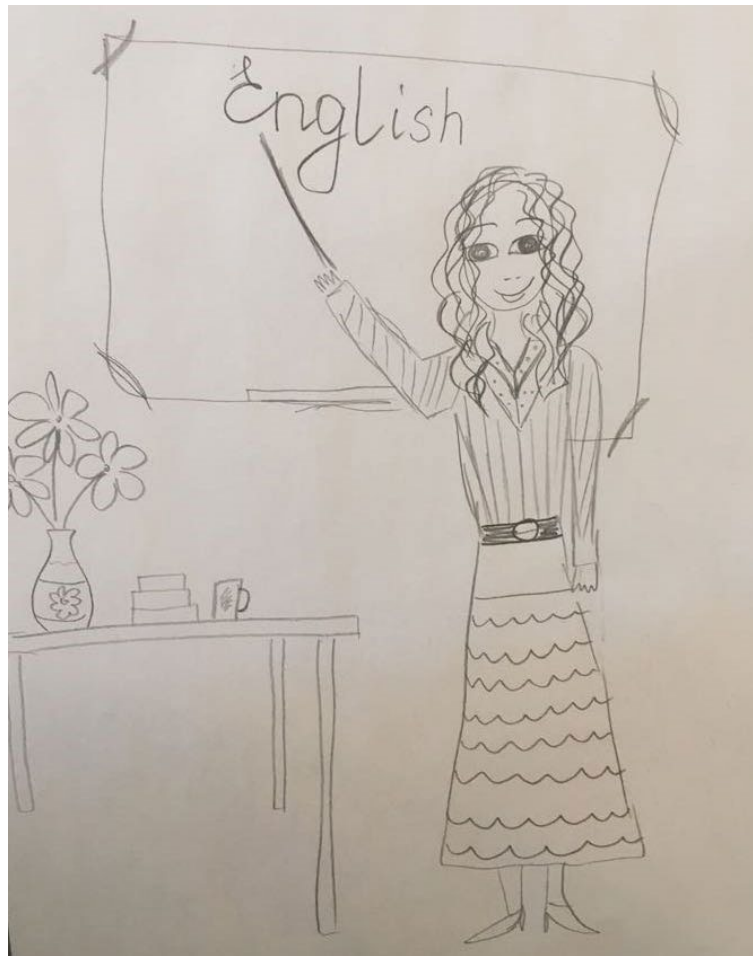


Figure 5. Student's drawing (S55).

While describing their drawings in Stage 2, most participants (85 of 100) reiterated the perceived qualities of good English teachers highlighted in Stage 1 of the interviews. However, the drawing process followed by a reflection on a visual yielded some features of language teaching practices not mentioned in Stage 1.

Based on the participants' commentaries, in 89 drawings (out of 100) the teacher is depicted as the authority in class who is "explaining a new topic". In these drawings the teacher is "standing" and is sometimes "gesturing"; she or he is neither moving around nor interacting by moving among learners (e.g. Figures 3, 4, 5). Furthermore, more than a quarter of the students mention that a good English teacher "pours knowledge into students' brains", "waters with knowledge" (e.g. Figures 1, 2).

Another common theme is that in most drawings (81 of 100) the teacher is portrayed with a smile suggesting the importance of affective aspects in learning. For example, in Figure 3 "the teacher is a smile; she smiles and explains". This finding concerning affective aspects is significant because in Stage 1 most interviews specifically mention smiling. Another feature widespread in the drawing data concerns the teacher's dress and appearance (e.g. in Figures 4, 5) which can be referred to the aesthetic dimension of teachers' qualities mentioned in meaningful contexts by almost half of the participants in Stage 1.

Although the drawing task asked to draw a good English teacher while teaching, learners are portrayed in 70 images (out of 100) as faceless blobs, circles, matchsticks, and there are not many details, variations, or identities while in Figure 2 a learner is depicted as a flower; the remaining 30 drawings do not show learners. As for learners' stance and bodily orientations, in most cases (65 out of 70) they are

behind desks “sitting quietly and listening very carefully” and in only five drawings they are working in pairs/groups or doing activities.

Interestingly, physical conditions of classroom are also important as mentioned in 79 interviews through such sample quotes as “if the classroom’s stuffy, we don’t want to be there and learn” and “the room must be aired and have big windows, so that there’s a lot of light which motivates to learn”. This finding is not particularly reported in the literature on English teaching practices and needs further investigation. Based on the evidence here, the spatial dimension in relation to good teaching practices arguably impacts learning.

Discussion and Conclusion

Based on the evidence of students’ verbal and visual accounts, good English teachers’ perceived roles in this study go beyond teaching the subject. They are expected to embody a range of qualities found on cognitive, moral, social, affective, and aesthetic dimensions. These results support prior research on students’ expectations of good English teachers in Iran (Cortazzi et al., 2015) and Kazakhstan (Makhanova & Cortazzi, 2013; Zhunussova, Cortazzi & Jin, 2022). The dimensions revealed in this research are equally important for the students and given an increasing shift to virtual learning it would be interesting to investigate how these dimensions are enacted or transformed online.

While recognizing that learners’ expectations might be idealistic, this study can serve as a point of reflection for English teachers. Given the potential influence of learners’ beliefs on learning outcomes, awareness of learners’ views can contribute to teachers’ better understanding of learners to facilitate teaching.

This study also contributes to the literature on language learners’ beliefs by extending more common methodological approaches. Using drawings as a research instrument yielded richer details which complemented the verbal data to explore learners’ beliefs of good English teachers. The act of drawing engaged the participants in another modality of thinking (Kalaja et al., 2008), while talking about a drawing yielded insight not only on the topic of the study but also involved learners’ self-reflection which can raise their metacognitive awareness and enhance learning. Visual data also revealed some details concerning learners’ perceived identity which needs further examination. Thus, the study suggests that drawings can be effectively used as a complementary research instrument to explore beliefs on various aspects of ELT in other contexts. As a study of Finnish university students’ beliefs demonstrates (Kalaja et al., 2008), there is a different meaning present in visual data which can lead to noticeable differences between visual and verbal accounts. Therefore, it is important to note that one research tool cannot capture all the possible meanings of views held by the learner because of the methodological challenges associated with investigating beliefs. As findings of this research suggest, drawings can elicit personal and social knowledge of how good English teachers are perceived with further insight into how ideas about English teachers can be influenced by the sociocultural factors. These are social, cultural, and personal layers through which visual accounts can communicate meanings associated with teachers (Weber & Mitchell, 1995).

Due to the preliminary nature of this research, it should be noted that future steps will further develop theoretical and methodological work for a better understanding of meaning making processes underlying multimodal modes of generating research data.

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