Student Teachers of English on the Lookout for Good Teaching

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ABSTRACT

Education has always been a subject to changes structure and content wise; its quality has been an issue all the time. In Latvia, the recent reform named School 2030, which essence is a competence approach to the curriculum, is introducing its requirements. Additionally, the government has planned to introduce a system monitoring the quality of education by 2023. Consequently, questions like what a good school, teacher and teaching are gain certain attention. The particular qualitative approach research concentrates on finding out student teachers' answers to these questions as core values they remember to be the most significant ones to make them think of their schools, teachers and their teaching as good. The aim of the research is to examine how student teachers of English who have begun their teacher education studies recently perceive good teaching. To provide answers, they filled out Personal Statement – an introductory part of the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages. The research sample of the case study consists of 55 second and fourth year full and part-time students who have decided to become teachers of English. They are studying at the faculty of Education, Psychology and Art, the University of Latvia. To analyse student teachers' opinions, content analysis was used. The data allows concluding that student teachers' perception of good teaching is characterised by three key elements: good classroom management techniques, relevant teaching methodology and teachers' personalities. Furthermore, student teachers of English are of the opinion that in good teaching environment teachers take into account their pupils' personalities. The same ideas prevail in the answers revealing what student teachers want to master in their studies. That implies student teachers of English long to see academic staff at the university as role models of good teaching.

Keywords: European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL), methodology of English as a foreign language, reflection before action, student teachers of English, teacher professional identity

Introduction

Education is a multifaceted notion. As a social science, it entails and represents several co-existing parts. To mention a few, education system, schools, teaching and learning, and, of course, teachers, pupils and parents. Education as a system has undergone serious changes in all the times and all the countries trying to reach its best form to comply with certain quality standards. In Latvia, the recent education system reform is called Skola 2030 (English: School 2030) and its essence is to introduce a competence approach to the curriculum. A benchmark for the quality of education in this case is considered to be pupils who as a result of their schooling become ready for real life having acquired necessary knowledge, skills and attitude, having honed their transversal skills and developed a core of vales and virtues (School 2030). Consequently, the new approach to the curriculum asks for a new quality monitoring system. The Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Latvia (Latvijas Republikas Izglītības un Zinātnes Ministrija IZM, 2020, 4) has proposed a scheme consisting of four basic categories which have to be evaluated to determine the quality of education in each particular educational establishment – compliance with the goals, quality of teaching and learning, inclusive environment, and good administration. Each of the four categories is divided into three subcategories. Within the scope of the present article its author being a teacher educator, the category of quality of teaching and learning is of importance as out of its three subcategories it represents two teacher education in general deals with: the quality of teaching and learning and teachers' professional capacity. More detailed criteria for both of them can be traced in the standard of the profession 'Teacher', which gives a comprehensive look on responsibilities and tasks teachers have to perform in Latvia. For example, to plan and carry out teaching, assess pupils' progress and learning achievements, participate in continuous professional development, and be a part of the educational establishment (Valsts izglītības un satura centrs VISC, 2020). Taking into account the amount of requirements teachers face to prove the quality of the work they do is good, teacher education programmes introduce students to them gradually. Moreover, even prior to setting out in the professional field during teaching practices, students are helped to become aware of what 'good teaching' could mean by inviting them to participate in reflection-before-action activities. The emphasis of these activities is to let students imagine and visualise what, why and how will be done in their professional practice (Loughran, 2002; Conway, 2001). With the help of university faculty and school mentors, it fosters student teachers' turning into reflective practitioners (Kowalczuk-Waledziak et al., 2018; Latkovska, 2015; Freese, 2006). Furthermore, reflection-before-action serves as a basis for student teachers to see themselves as practitioners in realistic circumstances avoiding having shattered images – discrepancy between unrealistic and realistic vison of future professional prospects (Cole & Knowles, 1993).

Building their professional identity with the help of reflection, student teachers understand significance of teacher professionalism, which ultimately means 'good teaching' (Miķelsone & Odiņa, 2020; Dassa & Derose, 2017; Urzua & Vasquez, 2008; Graham & Phelps, 2003).

To find out what 'good teaching' means for student teachers, is the aim of the particular study as its author is a language teacher educator whose task is to help student teachers of English comply with requirements that in future will prove their professional quality. In order to reach the aim of the study, the author first analysed theoretical and methodological literature on what constitutes good teaching and learning of English as a foreign language. Literature analysis proves that in spite of reforms in education and changing times, good teaching continuously involves three main constituent elements which are a teacher's personality, a teacher's knowledge of the language itself and a teacher's skills to apply relevant language teaching and learning methodology (Johnson & Golombek, 2020; Goksel & Rakicioglu-Soylemez, 2018; Darling-Hammond, 2006; Gabrielatos, 2002). Gabrielatos (2002) provides a visual comparison of the relationship of the three elements to those of an equilateral triangle, which is stable only if all three sides are of equal length. He proposes an idea that such interaction of the three elements fosters efficiency of language teachers. Darling-Hammond calls it 'a vision of professional practice' (2006, 5) which helps student teachers see the essence of teaching as a profession and encourages them to think about their pupils' rights to learn in a democratic environment. Concentrating on pupils and their learning is also a key factor for good teaching in Latvia nowadays according to School 2030 as only a teacher who thinks about rapport with pupils can help them flourish as personalities and become competent language users.

Methodology

After the analysis of theoretical and methodological literature, student teachers' of English opinions on good teaching and good teachers were gathered. The research method of the study is a case study as a practice-oriented approach to small-scale education research (Cropley, 2022; Hamilton, 2018). The data collection method is a document analysis – student teacher's reflection on their prior learning – answers to open questions answered in writing as an assignment within the study course on foreign language teaching and learning methodology. Prior to completing the assignment, student teachers were informed their answers would be a part of the case study. Student teachers who agreed to be participants of the study submitted their answers to the Moodle system of the University of Latvia, while those who had their reasons not to agree, skipped the assignment. Qualitative content analysis was used to analyse the submitted work and define student teachers' emerging answer patterns (Cropley,

2022; Cohen et al., 2007) on what they consider to be good teaching and good teachers marking the constituent elements of personality, methodology and language knowledge based on the scientific and methodological literature analysis. Respective codes used for student teachers' answers: P = personality, M = methodology, L = language.

Overall, 55 second and fourth year full-time and part-time student teachers (n = 55) representing a professional bachelor's study programme 'Teacher', a sub-programme 'Teacher of English' at the faculty of Education, Psychology and Art became participants of the current study. It was a non-probability convenience research sample (Cohen et al., 2007). It consisted of 49 female and six male students and 53 local and two Erasmus students.

To provide their opinions, student teachers completed a part of a Personal Statement – a first part of the European Portfolio for Student Teachers of Languages (EPOSTL), which is an intellectual output of one of project teams of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML). EPOSTL as a reflection tool for teacher education 'encourages to reflect on the competences a teacher strives to attain and on the underlying knowledge which feeds these competences; helps prepare for future profession in a variety of teaching contexts; promotes discussion among student teachers, teacher educators and mentors; facilitates self-assessment of developing competence; provides an instrument which helps chart progress' (Newby et al., 2007, p. 5). The open questions student teachers answered in a free form in writing, and which content was analysed to reach the aim of the present study were as follows:

1. As learners in school, you already have had a lot of contact with teaching. What aspects – teacher's qualities, practices etc. – of your own language teaching might influence how you wish or do not wish to teach? Mention positive and negative examples of being taught.
2. What do you wish to do at school as a teacher?
3. To your mind, what five characteristics are important for a teacher?

Results

At the beginning of the analysis of student teachers' reflection, it has to be mentioned that they mainly wrote about female teachers and male teachers were only mentioned five times. Therefore, there is no teacher gender difference taken into account in the present study. As regards student teachers' reflection on their positive experiences of being taught at school, the majority of them belong to the code of personality P = 59. Most recurring thematic threads are 'patient' and 'understanding' followed by 'approachable' and 'helpful'. In general, it may be said student teachers value rapport with teachers. Separate expressions exemplifying student teachers' opinions: 'the teacher didn't label us',

'we felt safe and weren't afraid to make mistakes', 'our thoughts were taken into account' and 'the teacher taught us more than English – she taught us life'. Second most often mentioned code is methodology $M = 50$. Key thematic threads are 'creative' and 'prepared'. It may be concluded that student teachers appreciate if teachers do have lesson plans, but at the same time they are flexible to adapt to pupils' interests and needs. Separate examples of expressions for this code are 'the teacher always had heaps of materials being ready to use all of them should the need arise', 'the teacher knew how to challenge us – she offered different kinds of activities'. Emphasis of classroom management skills belong to the methodology code as well because student teachers' expressions, for example, on classroom dynamics and discipline are combined with methodology: 'she organised group work so that we could help each other to learn new vocabulary' or 'a combination of strict classroom rules and well-planned lessons was awesome'. The code of a teacher knowing the language is $L = 27$. Two recurring thematic threads are 'knows English herself' and 'speaks English in lessons'. On the one hand, the mentioned examples reveal a positive trend of knowledgeable teachers who speak the target language with pupils. While on the other hand, it may be inferred that there are also teachers who do not do that, which is worrying. To mention an expression standing out among others and not directly corresponding to any of the codes, is a description of the teacher's appearance: 'Her looks! Great! She looks like a wife of the president!' Even though there is only one expression like this, it is still a reminder that besides personality and methodological and language competence teachers should look decent.

Being asked to think of their negative school experience, student teachers' answers again show the importance of a teacher's personality $P = 50$. Typical expressions for the are 'scary' and 'demotivating'. Unfortunately, student teachers write about teachers whose lessons are not psychologically safe for pupils – they are labelled and not listened to. In the worst cases, screaming and others signs of emotional bullying are mentioned. These expressions serve as warnings for teacher educators to be good role models for student teachers to help to direct their negative experiences of being taught to positive ones. Methodology as a code is second most often mentioned by student teachers $M = 44$. There are such recurring thematic threads as 'just checking answers' and 'no explanations'. That means teacher educators have to help student teachers become aware of and learn a variety of methodological approaches to choose from when getting ready for their subject lessons. The language code is mentioned two names, which is good because it allows thinking that in cases teachers are not pleasant personalities or are incompetent teaching and learning methodology wise, they at least use good English themselves. Both expressions for the code highlight a teacher's unwillingness to admit to having made a language mistake.

To sum up good and bad experiences of teachers and their work student teachers have described, resemble the constituent elements of good teaching and teachers emerging from the literature analysis. However, there is no equilateral triangle in the case of the present study as the sides of personality and methodology are longer than the language side.

When asked to think about things they would wish to do at school as teachers, student teachers give a preference to methodology $M = 52$. They wish to help pupils learn and 'see learners' development' and 'work creatively'. Among the expressions of the methodology code, there are also expressions that concern information technologies because students name them as a 'brilliant tool to enliven any lesson plan'. Separate student teachers mention separate components as main things they would love to work on as teachers, such as helping pupils master particular spoken and written reception and production skills or the overall linguistic competence. Personality as a code is mentioned is $P = 33$. A recurring thematic thread for the code is 'rapport with pupils'. There is also a thematic thread of 'importance of my own lifelong learning' which in context emphasises student teachers' wish to grow as personalities – encompassing a broader scope of interests besides teaching. Language does not emerge as a code in the particular question. That may mean that future teachers of English do not think about the language as an individual element because they see it as part and parcel of methodology – honing their language competence simultaneously with the methodological competence.

In the third question on five important characteristics of teachers, student teachers make the code of personality stand out $P = 91$ once again emphasising 'patience' and 'understanding'. Besides these two, there are such thematic threads as 'open-minded', 'passionate' and 'respectful'. Methodology is the second code $M = 61$. The dominant thematic threads here are 'lesson planning' and 'creativity'. If in the previous question the language code on its own is rare, in this question student teachers do mention it $L = 34$. However, they rather emphasise a teacher's linguistic competence than their oral and written reception and production. What makes the author of the article think, is the student teachers' idea that an important characteristic feature of a teacher is 'being ready to take a break and ask for help' ($n = 6$). This reveals a healthy psychological approach to one's health and, in fact, could be counted among the expressions of the personality code as taking care of oneself means being able to act better for others as well.

Conclusions

Good teachers and good teaching have always been a significant matter as it gets the society to the ultimate goal of education – competent pupils which turn into competent society. Therefore, the quality of education, teaching and teachers

has always been measured. An issue, however, is that what makes the quality 'good' is a changing matter. To find out how good teaching and good teachers are viewed in the 21st century, the author of the article analysed relevant scientific and methodological literature and concluded that three constituent elements are a teacher's personality, teacher's methodological competence and the knowledge and competence of the language. Although according to the literature analysis, all of the three components are of equal importance, the analysis of the opinions of the student teachers' of English show that they regard a teacher's personality and competence in teaching and learning methodology to be more important leaving language knowledge behind or they do incorporate it within the methodology part. This is a sign for teacher educators, first, be good role models and, second, plan teacher education programmes the way it is possible for student teachers develop as personalities and learn the methodology of teaching and learning a foreign language while improving their own language competence – linguistic competence and oral and written reception and production. A new trend, even if it is not tremendous, of the perception of good characteristics of teachers among student teachers can be highlighted in the present study. In particular, student teachers think that teachers should care not only for their pupils' well-being in lessons and in school in general, they should be able to take care of themselves as well. This demonstrates that sustainability of a teacher's inner sources linked with the idea of good teachers and good teaching may be a topic for further exploration.

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