

The X-Factor Profile Characteristics of English Language Teachers in Non-Native Setting

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Abstract

Phrases such as 'learning English is fun' or 'English is fun' are often heard when one speaks about learning English especially in a context where English is not the mother tongue of the learners. What about when the focus shifts to English language teachers on the other hand, who are non-native speakers of English? The focus on the teacher other than the curriculum, syllabus, material and pedagogy needs considerable attention in promoting effective English language learning. What are the profile characteristics of an English teacher that can help most importantly first boost the students' motivation and interest to learn English. Studies have explored in general the characteristics of effective language teachers but to what extent has it identified the 'X' factors. This paper addresses a discussion on the the profile characteristics of specifically non – native English language teachers. It focuses on the relevance of the 'qualities' of English language teachers' in relations to English teacher attributes specifically. We gathered the views and opinions of English language instructors teaching English at one of the local higher institutions who are non-native and who have had twenty years' experience in the field of ELT (English Language Teaching) on what they believe is the X factor characteristics profile of an English language teacher.

Keywords: profiling, characteristics, English language teachers, non-native

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1.0 Introduction

'Profiling' is defined as 'the use of personal characteristics or behaviour patterns to make generalizations about a person'. 'Characteristics' in general refers to attributes, feature, quality, traits, facet, mannerism, habit, idiosyncrasy or what is at times referred as the 'x-factor'. Sofian, (2007) lists the characteristics of language teachers which incorporate their interest, preparation of good lesson plans, punctuality, consistency, modesty as well as good control of classroom management. A study by Shishavan & Sadeghi (2009) on characteristics of an effective English language teacher as perceived by Iranian teachers and learners of English state that "that teachers and learners of EFL may have overlapping and at times divergent perceptions on desirable qualities of a good language teacher" (p. 136).

While some understanding of teacher characteristics exists in the teaching profession, the particular elements that constitute a more comprehensive and balanced profile of a teacher, in particular, an English language teacher, has been less explored. In fact there have not been many attempts at determining a profile of English language teachers as initiative towards boosting non-native speaking students' interest and motivation and that contributes to effective English language learning. This profile of English teachers is relevant to the present day, and within the local non-native speaking context with specific reference to non-native speaking teachers; second language speaker (L2) teachers.

Profiling of English language teachers' characteristics is also necessary given the scope of duties or the demands facing them. English language teachers need to have similar characteristics as teachers in general, but also those that are specific to language teaching. For example, there are general elements to be given emphasis in the teaching of the English language such as the curriculum, the syllabus, the teaching approach and the teaching and learning materials, to name a few. Much attention is in practice given in teacher training colleges to teacher professionalism in general ways or qualification for 'how to be a teacher'. This will include for instance, a teacher's classroom management, a teacher's questioning technics and others that relate to how the teacher carries out a lesson. However, the specific English language teacher's self-characteristics, meaning the teachers' behaviour, traits and attributes have not been determined or addressed a great deal especially so for L2 teachers teaching L2 students.

What is the characteristic profile of an English language teacher? What would be an even more significant question would be the 'X-factor characteristics profile of an English language teacher', thus the professionalism of English language teachers? An 'X-factor' is defined as i) a variable in a given situation that could have the most significant impact on the outcome and ii) a noteworthy special talent or quality. The question of quality is an important one as it comprises important elements such as traits of the teachers. An action research conducted on students with very poor level of skills in English found that several traits of language teachers that helped to enhance motivation for learning English were identified by the students accordingly (Othman et.al, 2011, 2014; Ya'acob A et. al 2013). Among the traits identified were teachers who were 'interesting' ("teachers not boring'), teachers who have 'no favoritism', teachers who are 'sporting' and teachers 'who are 'good' and 'not aggressive'. Since learning language needs to be fun and meaningful, these traits figured predominantly in the views of the respondents in the above study. These views also provide insights to the relevance of determining traits as one of the characteristics of an English teacher.

This paper discusses the characteristics that would contribute to the profiling of quality English language teachers. The main aim is to promote teachers' professionalism in their language teaching career. It focuses on the relevance of the 'qualities' of English language teachers' in relation to the attributes that English language teachers specifically should have as opposed to attributes of just teachers in general. It reviews some of the elements of teacher characteristics derived from works carried out on teacher profiling. This is done to arrive at an understanding of the subject of teacher characteristics and its relation to effective teaching and learning and to provide a platform from which to advance the idea of English language teacher profiling. A framework proposed by Gabrielatos (2002) is used for this purpose because of its relevance to the discussion on teacher characteristics and teaching effectiveness. The views and opinions of language instructors on the X factor characteristics profile of an English language teacher were also obtained from instructors who have had twenty years' experience in the field of ELT (English Language Teaching) in one of the local public universities. The question posed to the instructors was in regard to what they understood about the profile of teachers (in general) and the profile of English language teachers.

2.0 Framework of Effective Language Teachers

This part of the paper starts by looking at the Framework of Effective Language Teachers proposed by Gabrielatos (2002), as illustrated in Figure 1.0. The framework illustrates the relationship between three elements namely, methodology, language and personality. The framework forms the basis of the term 'person - who- teaches ' (Julian Edge, 1999). This framework is adopted by Gabrielatos (2002) to illustrate further the context of 'person - who-teaches –language’.

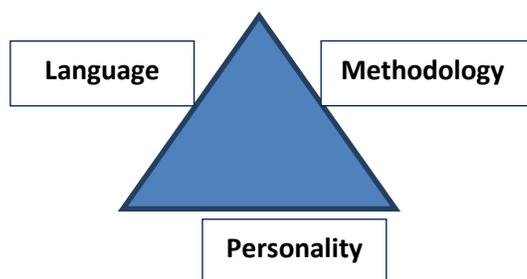


Figure 1.0: Framework of Effective Language Teachers

Source: Gabrielatos (2002)

Each side of the triangle represents each element of language teaching. The broader the space indicates the broader the effectiveness of a teacher. It proposes that when the development of each element is balanced among the three, the level of effectiveness would be higher. This means that when the equal perimeter of the sides of the triangle would reflect a balanced development. Observations carried out by Gabrielatos (2002) suggest that a balanced side corner of this framework is very important. It is even more important that all three elements are above the 'threshold' level.

According to Gabrielatos (2002), when knowledge of the language is rather limited, what is delivered by teachers can be less accurate. When teaching methods are not appropriate,

learning takes a longer time and leads to reduced motivation to learn the language among students. Further, when students find it difficult to use the language, there is, indirectly, less opportunity for language use in the classroom which will then lead to students losing interest in learning. This triangle is an impression of a rather complex relationship of characteristics of language teachers. However, it is a valid initial platform upon which to identify the basic elements that make up the characteristics profile of language teachers in general and English language teachers specifically in contributing to the effectiveness of the teaching and learning of English language in the classroom.

2.1 Effective English Language Teaching

Language is a complex entity. Given the diversity in the context of the use of language, it is not surprising that learning a foreign language is usually not quick or easy. Gabrielatos (2003) argues that a language teacher should have knowledge of the language being taught and teaching methods as well as possesses good personal qualities. For example, there is a need for teachers to have qualities such as patience, an open mind and good communication skills. Even in the context of limited infrastructure or physical facilities or insufficient materials, the teacher still needs to continue teaching. In fact, teachers need also to consistently ensure the effectiveness of teaching and learning in the classroom language skills.

There are two general views on the scope of the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of language teaching. Gabrielatos (2002) places emphasis on three matters related to teaching effectiveness based on the framework in Figure 1.0. In his view each side of the triangle illustrates elements that form the overall frame of reference of the effectiveness of an English language teacher. This is as shown in Figure 2.0.

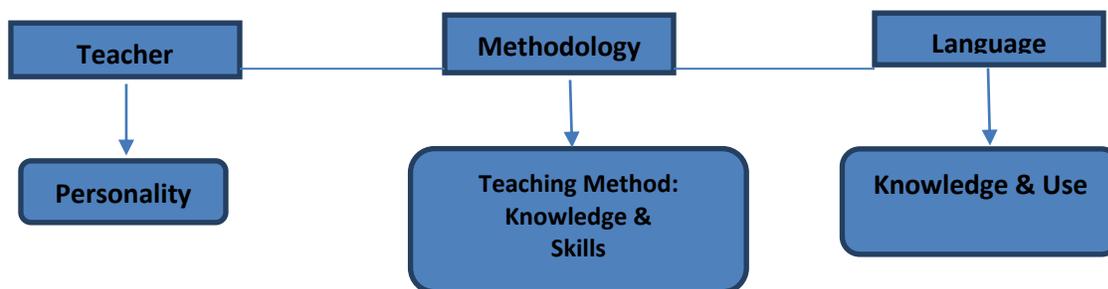


Figure 2.0: Elements of Effectiveness of Language Teacher Teaching of English

Source: Gabrielatos (2002)

2.2. Personality

Some key aspects contribute to the element of personality. These aspects include teacher self-awareness, interpersonal skills, ability to observe, to think critically, use of the experience, sensitivity to context, attitude towards change, development, diversity, quality of co-operation, power, work, perception of learning, teacher / student, student development.

2.3. Teaching Method

In terms of teaching method, teachers need to be aware of diverse views regarding the methods of teaching itself. They also need to look at existing teaching materials and be able to evaluate the appropriateness of the materials in class. Teachers need to be aware of existing theories and relate them to the materials designed and lessons planned for effective teaching and learning. It is also important to think of the problems that are likely to arise for students or teachers and be able to figure out how to address these problems. Other than that, teachers need to also initiate action research in class to evaluate the effectiveness of teaching and learning.

2.4 Language

Language element includes several key aspects including the teachers' skills and knowledge, concern for language, views on language, use of own language, views on the implications of language analysis and their perceptions on the students' level of language proficiency. Gabrielatos (2002) finds that these aspects may overlap. For example, teacher perception or knowledge can influence his or her teaching method. Teacher's level of self-consciousness or 'self-awareness' may also affect teacher's level of awareness towards what he believes to be effective language teaching.

2.5 The Concept of Effective Teaching

Teachers and school leaders are the most important school-based drivers of student outcomes (Malaysia Education Blue Print 2013). They are the ones responsible for ensuring that effective teaching and learning takes place in the classroom. Effective teaching & learning is defined as the process of teaching and learning and the quality of the processes that can develop human potential to the optimum level in terms of psychomotor, cognitive and affective domains. Dato 'Dr. Abdul Shukor Abdullah (1999) had stated that effective teachers demonstrate quality teaching and learning. He stresses that an effective teacher is a teacher who always tries to improve the quality of teaching and who is capable of promoting the development of student personality that encompasses a variety of personal values such as good morals, virtues, competence and adaptability to any given situation. He referred to the Policy Statement on Standards for Quality Education in Malaysia, (2001), which focused on a number of principles that contribute to the quality of teaching of a teacher. Among them are:

- a. varied approaches, methods and techniques that involve students actively
- b. use of support materials that are relevant to the current level of achievement, potential and progress of students;
- c. continuous evaluation and improvement of R & D.

He concludes that effective teaching by teachers not only include aspects of the curriculum, but also covers a wider scope such as leadership style, the culture of science and thinking, classroom management, motivation and encouragement and leadership curricula in the workplace. In relation to the profiling concept advanced in this paper, this view can be seen to relate to the framework proposed by Gabrielatos presented earlier where the main question is what constitutes a balanced triangle for a teaching staff in general and a language teacher specifically? A question to ask further is how can a language teacher determine what is required to achieve a high level of effectiveness in his or her teaching? Which element or elements should be given priority?

Taat (2012) argues that in relation to effective teaching and learning, teaching' is the process of delivering knowledge, information and skills to students whilst 'berkesan' (in Malay) to mean 'effective' is something that brings an impact. According to him, effective teaching is described as teaching that is capable of achieving the the targeted outcomes or objectives or at the very least teaching that results in better student. Al - Kailany and Iyad (1986) propose that teachers should opt for methods that can have a profound impact not only on the understanding of students but also affects the soul of the students. Miller (1990) on the other hand, suggests that every teaching must first be preceded with a plan.

All the above arguments place emphasis on the responsibility of the teacher and which is applicable to the context of language teaching and learning. This included contexts where there are differing variables at play such as a language teacher who teaches in schools as compared to teachers who teach students at tertiary level. In fact, there may exists a difference between teaching English as a second language and teaching English as a foreign language to international students.

3.0 Profile of Characteristics of English Language Teachers

3.1 Personality and Professionalism of Teachers

Western countries often emphasize the characteristics of teachers in general in relation to the teaching of a foreign language. Nik Hashim et.al (2014) propose a few examples of these characteristics such as the need for teachers to enhance students' interests, the need to use effective teaching methods and materials and to plan language activities . However, he also puts forth the views of Zhang & Watkins (2007), who question whether there is the possibility of overlooking the ' human aspect ' of teaching such as in giving a supportive and caring atmosphere as well as the necessary academic competence, promoting good personal qualities and morality and facilitating student learning.

Many in the teaching profession are aware that teachers should be highly competent in teaching and at the same time have appealing personalities to ensure effective student learning. However, to what extent does a teacher's personality affect teaching style? Zamriet. al (2009) suggest that it does to a certain extent. For example when personal examples are given during teaching, a friendly rapport between teacher and students can be created. The writers also believe that teachers who use this approach normally form exemplary behaviour and exhibit ways of thinking for students. They often oversee, guide and provide directions for students on how to do tasks. These teachers encourage their students to make observations and then to emulate the approaches that have been used or shown by the teacher. Though one may argue that this personal model teaching style is perhaps more appropriate for pupils at the school level, it is from experience that such teaching style is feasibly necessary for effective teaching at tertiary level. It is of equal importance too that such teaching styles are adopted in the teaching of English language whether it is English as a foreign language or English as a second language.

3.2 Professional English Language Teachers

What is understood by the term professionalism of teachers? This is a question often raised when the subject of professionalism of teachers is discussed. Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary (10th edition) defines professionalism as the conduct, aims or qualities that characterize or mark a profession or a professional person. Dewan Eja Pro (2004) on the other

hand outlines several criteria for professionalism which include attributes and skills for performing a particular task expected of a professional. The question is how far is the subject of professionalism of a teacher considered or questioned when doing teacher profiling? In addition, what is meant by the 'professionalism of English language teachers' as compared to professionalism of Malay language teachers or any other foreign language teachers? In this context the pedagogical aspect undoubtedly plays a very important role. Pedagogies need to change according to the needs and developments in the field of education. Enhancement of the knowledge and skills of teachers in line with the latest developments in science and engineering, for example, may be necessary and the use of the latest applications related to teaching need to be considered in order to enhance the professionalism of teachers.

Teacher professionalism also involves the subject of teaching materials and teaching aids. Effective teachers need to be concerned, for example, about use of equipment and courseware in teaching. A teacher who has good knowledge of pedagogy often places a high degree of emphasis on using up-to-date materials and those that are appropriate to the maturity level of the students. Also important is the appropriateness of teaching aids for maintaining the students' interest in learning a foreign language. In this case, conventional teaching aids can also be used effectively, but the use of computers has often been important and helpful. However, the method of teaching and how these teaching aids are used or implemented in class requires pedagogical maturity and high level of professionalism As Othman, (2006) states "diversifying the use of teaching aids should be done by a teacher to maintain a high level of student interest". (p 63)

To maintain a high level of student interest can however be a big challenge for teachers especially when the students see no real interests or need to learn a foreign language, or believe that learning a language would not bring any benefit to them. An example of such a case is when learning a language is a graduation requirement. There are also instances when speaking a foreign language is not required outside the campus since the existing language can still be spoken and readily understood by others. Another phenomenon relates to the context of foreign students where they find that they could still function in English because it is a second language in Malaysia. Likewise, Arab students from the Middle East are still able to speak in Arabic because there is a population of Arab-speaking individuals in Malaysia. Thus, to maintain a high level of student interest in learning a language is not easy.

Borg (2006), in his study to identify characteristics of foreign language instructors finds that methodology is one of the features that primarily distinguishes foreign language subject teachers from teachers of other subjects such as economics or history . He believes that teaching English for example requires a progressive approach for teaching and learning. This is true for Bahasa Melayu teachers. Variation in the use of teaching aids and teaching materials such as use of songs in class is encouraged, although doing this can be a challenge when implemented in cultures that are not interested in singing as an activity. Choosing an appropriate song can therefore be difficult. In the teaching of English, teachers have made use of children's songs with simple melody, or melodious folk songs as these are more appropriate as teaching materials.

4.0 perspective of English Language Teachers

The teacher respondents provided input involving key characteristic elements of teachers. Initially the respondents defined ' the characteristics of teachers ' along the lines of years of teaching experience, areas of expertise and interest in teaching. However, gradually, other aspects they believed to contribute to the effectiveness of teaching and learning were raised, as will be described below.

4.1 Teaching philosophy

Based on feedback given by teacher respondents, teaching philosophy is one element that defines a characteristic of a teacher. Emphasis is given to a teaching philosophy that sees learning as a lifelong experience. In adherence to this philosophy, the teacher often would make use of 'realia ' in the classroom or, if ' realia ' cannot be brought into the classroom, he or she would place students in a suitable environment outside the classroom. The respondents see language as being a lifelong skill whereby students will need to take whatever knowledge about the language and skills required for use outside of the classroom in real life setting. Therefore teachers of English will need to be forward thinking and create whatever environment is necessary for students to use the language as preparation later on in their lives.

Teaching philosophy is also seen as having the knowledge of the science of teaching and learning. According to a language instructor interviewed, it is important for teachers to hold on to concepts such as ' behaviourism ' or ' constructivism ' to provide them with direction in teaching and learning the language. A teacher should be clear about the teaching and learning principles he or she brings into the classroom. Without that knowledge, learning outcomes specified will not be easily achieved. In this case the practices of the instructor are not likely to be in tandem with the philosophy of teaching and learning. The subject of philosophy or the science of teaching and learning is broad and encompasses many aspects. The question facing English language teachers is how these concepts can be applied to the teaching of the English language in practical ways.

4.2 Realistic and practical

There is a need for teachers to be realistic and practical in his or her practices. For example, teachers need to be aware that reference books and textbooks provided for the purpose of teaching and learning in the classroom are only as a guide. It is the responsibility of the teacher to assess whether any of the existing textbooks or instructional materials is appropriate for students. Therefore, teachers need to be able to think and act sensibly during the teaching and learning process in the classroom and make decisions accordingly, such as when to use a particular teaching aid or how much of it should be exploited in the classroom. Existing teaching materials is one element that sets the parameters for teaching and learning, but they must bring about benefits to the students and not the teachers.

4.3 Role of Auditor

A teacher should act as an 'auditor' in a sense that they should be able to assess the classroom learning situation, including the students' emotions during the learning process. In doing so, teachers would be able to see if there is a need to vary the teaching approaches used or materials used. In other words, teachers need to be flexible rather than rigidly following one particular method or approach. Here the emphasis should be on student -oriented approach

(student oriented) and material- oriented. The teacher in the role of the auditor must be able to identify students' progress and achievement during the learning process. If a student has achieved the objectives specified, instructors could enhance the student's achievement further by setting other objectives to provide other learning opportunities for students.

4.4 As a Role Model

Teachers should be a role model to students in terms of skills and appearance, language use and the way he or she communicates and interacts with students. In this case, the personality of the teacher plays a role. There is also a need for teachers to be a resource for information, a 'coach ' and counselor. Ability to act as counselor is an important characteristic of a teacher. The position of teachers as role models can help build students' personalities.

4.5 Language Competence and Knowledge

Language teachers must have a good level of language competence and the linguistic knowledge of the language being taught. In other words they must have command of the language and are adept at using the language themselves. For example, not only is it important for language teachers to demonstrate the correct pronunciation and intonation in his or her teaching, they need to also have the ability to identify pronunciation problems among students and find an appropriate technique or method to address the problem. With this knowledge and competence, lessons can be planned in more organized ways important aspects of any learning units can be identified. In addition, knowledgeable teachers are able to formulate examination questions appropriate to the learning objectives. There is also knowledge of the culture of the language. In this case, the knowledge of the language itself may not be sufficient in English language teaching. Respondents spoke about knowing the culture such as the culture of the language in terms of the manner and style of speaking. This aspect is not restricted to pronunciation alone, but more of the English teacher getting into character and to be able to speak with the correct facial expressions and mannerism of a native speaker of English.

4.6 Accountability

A high level of accountability is another element which is said to form the profile of teachers. According to the respondents, accountability on the part of the teachers helps students become more conscientious and persistent in learning. One of the reasons for this is that instructors who take responsibility for student learning are willing to provide learning support for students in all their academic endeavours. One way of doing this is attending to students' needs when an assignment is given such as explaining and giving examples and guidelines to make the assignment clear to the students. In addition, monitoring students' progress and performance for the purpose of providing the necessary guidance and assistance is also necessary.

4.7 Personality

Personality is defined as attitude, interest and patience that make up the characteristics of a teacher. The ability to adapt one's teaching according to the needs of the students is dependent on the personality of the teacher. For example, a teacher who only focuses on only the syllabus prescribed regardless of whether the student has achieved the level of understanding required can be said to lack the personality for teaching. Voice delivery, intonation and appropriate mannerisms in class play a part too towards boosting spirits or passion for learning. Teachers who ignore student involvement (engagement) in what should be a two-way learning

process can hinder the effectiveness of learning. Thus, there are particular traits that language teachers should possess. Besides being understanding, respondents believe that English language teachers should be 'exuberant and enthusiastic' 'vivacious' and 'communicative' in order to create lively and meaningful exchanges in class. They also need to be lively so as to sustain students' interest in class. Closely related to these personal qualities are the teacher's interpersonal skills seen to be important towards creating good teacher-student relationship and ultimately better language learning for the students. One of the skills subsumed under interpersonal skills is tact. English language teachers should possess the necessary strategies and communication skills to correct students' errors and provide improvement measures without demotivating the students in any way. In other words, teachers' classroom discourse is not to be taken for granted in classrooms.

4.8 Teaching strategies

Respondents are also in agreement that English language teachers should have a variety of teaching strategies to help develop students' skills in using the language. In this sense, the professional qualities of the teacher play a big role. Nonetheless, respondents also believed that English language teachers should also be innovative in their approaches in that they are willing to vary their strategies according to students' needs, current thinking and current ways of learning. For example, reading in the 21st century is no longer restricted to hardbound copy of text, but is now more widespread to cover reading carried out online where hypermedia materials and other sources of input have become available to the students for their language learning purposes. Respondents believe that in cases like this, the teacher has to be open and accepting of current changes and innovate accordingly. In this regard, both the professional and personal qualities /personality of the language teacher are seen to be important.

5.0 Discussion

The paper illustrates that differing views exist regarding the characteristics of English language teacher, but it is possible to see a general pattern across these views. Many of the characteristics mentioned can be said to be professional in nature such as knowledge and command of the language, knowledge of teaching strategies and approaches and the ability to provide the necessary learning support for students. However, one can also see emphases placed on personal qualities/personality as important characteristics of English language teachers. The views obtained from the Malaysian language teachers illustrate this quite clearly. Since the 'survey' of the teachers was exploratory in nature, and largely perception-based, it is too early to say at this point if in the Malaysian context personal qualities are key or dominant characteristics of English teachers. The findings however can be said to be in line with other studies on teacher qualities carried out by Al-Khairi (2015), and to some extent Borg (2006) where personality and personal qualities appeared quite significantly in the discussion on the characteristics of an English language teacher. It has to be said also that the findings in this paper provide interesting direction for further research and important insight towards establishing a profile of English language teachers, as it is relevant to the Malaysian context. As Borg (2006) argues, the concept of language teachers' characteristic is 'multidimensional' thus discussing or determining 'key distinctive characteristics' of language teachers would have to be 'grounded in particular language teaching contexts' (Borg, 2006 p. 25).

Gabrielatos' (2002) theory on achieving a balance among the three elements that comprise effective language teachers will need to be confirmed through more focused study of teacher characteristics. For instance there is indication that this balance can be achieved such as in cases where variation in teaching strategies needs to be accompanied by willingness to change and innovate, in cases where using instructional materials need to be done in sensible ways. There are also times when methodological considerations need to go in tandem with the changing times, thus the need to be reflective and adaptable.

6.0 Conclusion

The characteristics profiling of language teachers in general and English language teachers specifically are significant toward contributing to the effectiveness of language teaching and learning. Gabrielatos' theory (2002), which highlighted the triangulation of the three elements of Language, Method and Personality synchronises the perceptions on characteristics profiling of language teachers gathered from experienced teachers themselves. In particular, the characteristic features of English language teachers take into account the need for the teachers to be versatile and adaptable in providing a learning context that is beneficial for students.

There is a need to communicate to teachers the importance of recognizing the profile of teacher characteristics, as advanced in this paper, and its relevance to effectiveness in teaching and learning, including English language teaching. The implication for teacher training colleges is quite significant because if identifying teacher characteristics could bring about better teaching and learning, teacher training colleges should give emphasis on teacher characteristics profiling to focus on building teacher characteristics toward training or developing better language teachers. More focus should be given to elements of personality, commitment and accountability of language teachers. In the teaching and learning of Malay language as a foreign language to foreign speakers, besides personality and the others, knowledge of the culture and characteristics of the foreign learners are also necessary. These characteristics should be appropriate with, if not adapted to the maturity of foreign students in general and cultural diversity likely to affect the personality of the foreign students.

The subject of 'Profiling' advanced in this paper is still at the preliminary stage. Further feedback, for instance, needs to be obtained from a larger number of respondents to provide a better view of the characteristic elements of a language teacher. The feedback reported in this paper seems general as well, but does hold promise in terms of recognizing the idea of the 'characteristic English language teacher'. The results obtained thus far commensurate with theory, but more evidence is obviously needed to give a balanced view of the existing profile. There is also a need to consider elements that could differ from existing findings such as language teachers and teaching in the 21st century, especially with respect to the English language.

While this paper puts forth the relevance of the 'profiling characteristics' of English language teachers with supporting views and opinions of teachers in the Malaysian context, its relevance should extend to the region of ASEAN (The Association of Southeast Asian Nations) too where English is mainly taught by the local non-native English speaker teachers. The

awareness of the need to be competent in communicating the lingua franca at international arena is indispensable among the citizens of ASEAN especially the youth of ASEAN countries.

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