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Students' Perceptions of EFL Teachers' Online Effectiveness in Post-COVID-19 Moroccan Higher Education

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Abstract
The current study explores the EFL students' perceptions and attitudes towards their teachers' effectiveness in the post-pandemic era. It also provides insights into the current situation of EFL teaching effectiveness in Moroccan higher education, emphasizing teacher training, pedagogical flexibility, and digital integration to meet the ever-evolving post-pandemic educational landscapes. The study investigates the perception of EFL students in Moroccan higher education on the impact of teachers' personal and interpersonal characteristics, subject matter knowledge, and teaching flexibility on their learning experience and academic performance. Using a mixed-method approach, data were collected from 120 university students through surveys and focus groups from undergraduate, graduate, and PhD students. The study investigates three primary aspects: interpersonal and behavioral characteristics of higher education students' regarding their instructors' teaching methods, subject matter knowledge of the Instructor regarding the subject, and language teaching approaches adopted to transmit and communicate information with students. The findings suggest that students highly value engaging with the instructors on a personal level, being in a supportive learning environment, and teachers' linguistic and pedagogical skills, emphasizing flexibility in teaching approaches. Students preferred practical teaching abilities over linguistic perfection, such as native-like accents, and stressed the importance of modern technology in education. The results underline the need for continuous teacher training in digital literacy and pedagogical innovation to meet evolving educational demands.

Keywords: Digital literacy, EFL teacher effectiveness, interpersonal characteristics, Moroccan higher education, post-pandemic education, student perceptions.

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Introduction

The provision of high-quality instruction has become increasingly crucial in the constantly evolving landscape of higher education (Zafar, 2019). Amidst the COVID-19 crisis, Morocco's educational environment has undergone significant changes, compelling instructors to re-evaluate their teaching methods and behaviours to ensure quality instruction and assessment, particularly in light of advancements in technology and the integration of AI in education (Ech-Chorfy, 2020).

Similarly, a study on the changing perceptions of teachers during the Covid-19 pandemic found a glaring gap of under-preparedness and technological illiteracy among most Moroccan teachers, along with challenges related to online teachers' training, which acted as a dividing line that inhibited teachers' development in times of crisis. Furthermore, the study highlighted the challenges in education that came with the rapid shift at the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis but faded when teachers felt more acquainted with the situation. In the same vein, the study suggested improving the Moroccan higher education situation by the active incorporation of new media technologies and/or virtual and online learning and teaching, as well as providing teachers and students with free and unlimited access to the internet, devices to work with online and receive professional training in online teaching and online resources management (Mounjid et al., 2021).

Indeed, the outbreak forced both learners and teachers to become more autonomous when learning is in question, and this has led to new and emerging pedagogies focusing on strengthening learners' autonomy being part and partial in the learning process. Second, autonomy is synonymous with learners' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation; hence, more emphasis is on implementing motivation-embedded courses and sustainable technologies to ensure a prompt, rapid and lasting impact of these technologies post-pandemic (Draissi & ZhanYong, 2020). Finally, the research problem dissected and discussed in the current paper is the lack of studies about the ongoing changes happening in the field of education due to the post-COVID-19 pandemic. Henceforth, the study aims to set the tone for the post-COVID-19 situation under the challenges, obstacles and solutions taking place due to the pandemic; it also intends to serve as a benchmark to future studies related to post-covid-19 situation in general and studies related to the Moroccan experience. The study also aims to explore EFL students' perceptions of teachers' effectiveness in post-pandemic Moroccan higher education, focusing mainly on personal and interpersonal characteristics.

Consequently, the paper aims to examine the teaching behaviours related to effective EFL university instructors in the English department.

The current study answers the following research questions:

RQ1: How do EFL students perceive the impact of teachers' personal and interpersonal characteristics on their learning experience in Moroccan higher education?

RQ2: To what extent does teachers' subject matter knowledge influence students' academic performance in EFL courses?

RQ3: How do students perceive the effectiveness of flexible teaching approaches compared to rigid textbook adherence in EFL education?

RO1: To explore EFL students' perceptions of teachers' effectiveness regarding personal traits, subject knowledge, and teaching flexibility.

RO2: To assess the role of modern technology and provide insights for improving teacher training and pedagogical innovation.

Review of the Literature

Teaching Effectiveness in Higher Education: Concepts and Definitions

Effectiveness in education is influenced by several variables and teaching modalities that intertwine with students' perception of concepts such as knowledge, education and skills improvement; this cross-sectional view of educational effectiveness within an educational model brings about a multi-modality of interplay between the different active parties in education; namely students, teachers and stakeholders. This negotiation of whether school and teacher effectiveness can shape students' learning patterns and behaviours. Furthermore, a research paper about factors affecting the efficiency of teaching argued that COVID-19 has been the wakeup call educational institutions needed. In this regard, Kuleto et al. (2021) claimed that:

> During the COVID-19 pandemic, school management played a major role in overcoming the hardest first few weeks and months during the complete lockdown…The academic leaders had to handle the conditions and manners of work closely, as well as maintain continuous communication with their instructors…Pandemic-related lockdown conditions forced schools to enforce a stronger hierarchical management discipline to ensure that the effectiveness of teaching was not seriously compromised. (p. 8)

Effectiveness has been cluttered into nine categories in terms of outside forces affecting teachers: empathy, group interaction, enthusiasm, organization, individual rapport, breadth of coverage, grading, reading, and difficulty. Additionally, Aldrup et al. (2022) described the direct correlation between being an effective teacher and a teacher's empathy for a fostered teacher-student interaction; this post-humanistic look is further emphasized when a relationship between cognition and affective empathy has been established. Aldrup et al. (2022) highlighted that:

> Cognitive and affective empathy complement each other in completing prosocial behaviors. The development of cognitive empathy encourages the effectiveness of empathy by helping the subject to focus on the object, even in its absence, remain emotionally distinct from the object, and determine the best course of action for the object's needs. (p. 3)

Castellano and Mikeska (2024) emphasized that effective higher education teaching involves a strong understanding of the subject matter and effectively presenting it to students. These perspectives recommend that effective university teaching encompasses more than just subject expertise but involves various instructional approaches to foster student learning and engagement.

Why Understanding Students' Perceptions is Key to Effective Education

Comparing students' perceptions to teachers' perceptions of their practices is paramount, as they could diverge or converge in content. According to Belghmi et al. (2024), when the actual classroom experience does not align with learners' expectations, it can lead to disappointment and potentially hinder the achievement of their anticipated learning outcomes. While students' beliefs of effective teaching methods may not be as advanced as those of educators, discrepancies between teachers' and learners' views on what constitutes effective teaching can lead to students lacking confidence and dissatisfied with the language class (Kuleto et al., 2021).

Evaluating EFL Teachers: Empirical Studies on the Student Perspective

Numerous studies have explored teachers' effectiveness from a student's perspective (Degirmenci, 2021; Means & Neisler, 2021; Singh et al., 2021). In the EFL context, researchers have examined the qualities that students perceive as crucial for their teachers' effectiveness. These studies have generally identified four critical dimensions of effective teaching: language

proficiency, students' perception, communication-related skills, and social and emotional skills (Aldrup et al., 2022). A study in the Gulf region found that faculty and students valued attributes such as content knowledge, communication skills, and rapport with students as crucial for effective English language teaching (Raza & Coombe, 2021). Similarly, another study in Indonesia revealed that undergraduate students perceived effective EFL teachers as those who demonstrated solid pedagogical knowledge, good rapport with students, and effective classroom management (Ghimire, 2019). These studies suggest that while some characteristics of effective teachers are universally recognized, contextual factors like cultural norms and educational systems can also shape students' perceptions. Therefore, it is important to continue exploring students' perspectives on effective teaching within specific educational contexts to gain a nuanced understanding of the qualities most valued by learners.

Teaching Effectiveness in the Post-COVID Era: Leveraging Technology's Importance

During the COVID-19 pandemic, the high demand for digital learning solutions has paved the way for innovative approaches that converted raw information into meaningful knowledge and enhanced effective communication between instructors and learners (Adipat, 2021). For teachers to be effective, they need to equip students with a skill set to be successful and productive as future citizens in the current Economy (Haleem et al., 2022). This entails teaching traditional core subjects and imparting the skills most in demand in the 21st century. Consequently, universities must develop innovative approaches to education and instruction. For example, educational reform initiatives have swiftly adapted their systems to accommodate the requirements of artificial intelligence by developing digital competencies and skills related to digital transformation, leveraging data analysis and insights to enhance student success, and utilizing AI applications to provide enriched educational environments and address longstanding educational challenges (Aldosari, 2020). Moreover, AI has been utilized to automate assessment and evaluation processes, enhancing efficiency and reducing faculty workload (Martín-Núñez et al., 2023).

Student Perceptions and Online Learning: A Post-COVID Analysis

The COVID-19 pandemic was an opportunity to rethink traditional education and rebuild a resilient educational model; it also granted teachers and educators alike a cross-cultural experience that fostered effectiveness among teachers and provided a new vision to follow (Belghmi & Marzak, 2025). A study on students' satisfaction and perception of online learning found that students' experience can be negatively affected due to information overload and the lack of social interaction. Furthermore, these psychological difficulties have been theorized to be easily overcome with minimal effort to redesign students' learning experiences and re-evaluate the interplay between traditional pedagogies and how they could be used in online learning spaces. The same study focused on the fluctuation in students' perceptions of technology and the vital role it played during and after the pandemic (Conrad et al., 2022):

> Findings suggest that information overload and perceptions about required technical skills positively influenced perceived online learning difficulty. This also influenced satisfaction with the online learning environment. Further, qualitative findings found that participants frequently reported design factors (eg, teaching quality, too many online discussions, too much information, class format) significantly contributed in impacting the learning experiences. (P. 17)

Departing from recommendations to deepen and widen the research scope in the hope of improving and better understanding Morocco's online education situation, especially students' changing perceptions in the educational landscape, as well as the scarcity in research related to accelerated

training post-pandemic and issues related to technology use. Henceforth, the paper aims to fill in the gap in the current literature by shedding light on the other facet and less spoken about, students' perceptions of teachers' online courses and the role they play in not only understanding but also improving the learning experience for learners (Mounjid et al., 2021).

The Moroccan Higher Education Vision for Effective EFL Teachers

Morocco has significantly improved its higher education system in recent years. The vision emphasizes equity development among learners at different levels, regions, and ages as a critical factor in developing the national education system and achieving social equity (Ech-Chorfy, 2020). Promoting foreign language proficiency, particularly in English, is among the measures to achieve this goal (Belhiah & Abdelatif, 2016). The current situation of ELT in Moroccan Higher Education has seen radical changes in content courses, with a de-emphasis on traditional language and literature courses and an emphasis on modern language and specialized courses, including new offerings such as training executives, English for diplomacy, English for entrepreneurship, and business. Furthermore, teaching methodology has evolved, and student-centred approaches have become the norm. For instance, pair work, group work, and presentations have been introduced in English Departments to address the shortcomings of traditional lecturing practices. Lastly, assessment with a formative orientation aims not only at evaluating students but also at providing feedback on the teaching and learning process (Belghmi et al., 2024). Lastly, El Hilali and Moubtassime (2023), following their work on lessons learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic, have advised the government to consider equipping schools with the necessary teaching technological tools. Moreover, they also demanded that future research be conducted to support teachers and students alike in improving everyone's (Lamtara, 2014) preparedness in any situation moving forward and ensuring a quality education for everyone as an ultimate objective (EL Hilali & Moubtassime, 2023).

Methodology

The purpose of the study is to explore students' perceptions and attitudes towards technology-mediated learning post-Covid-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the study ***participants*** are divided into two clusters; for the quantitative data, 120 EFL first, second, and third-year BA students belonging to the Faculty of Letters and Humans Sciences Dhar El Mahraz, Fes. For the qualitative data, twelve students from the same institution participated in focus group interviews, and they were chosen based on accessibility and interest in the study. ***The procedures*** include following an exploratory, mixed-method sequential approach to data collection and analysis conducted in two phases between April 2023 and November 2023. ***The findings*** highlight the importance of competence among teachers in opposition to performative skills. Students also showed a distinct inclination towards teachers who design online teaching modalities that do not follow the norm and that foster students' creative skills in an online learning setting.

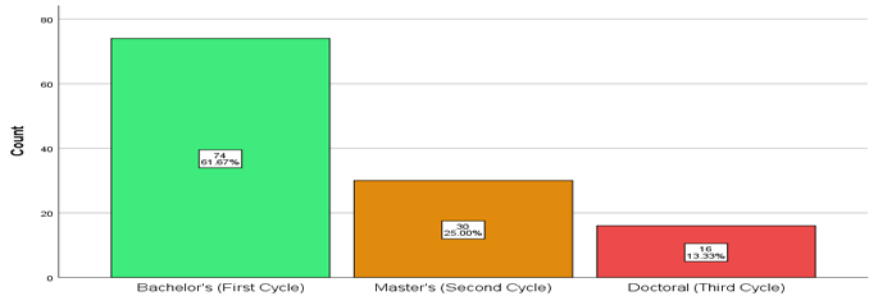


Figure 1. Sample university-level distribution

Figure One shows the studied population, which is made of BA students making 61.67% of the grand total, followed by MA students, 25% of the whole population, and finally, PhD students, who are 16 and constitute 13.33% of the population.

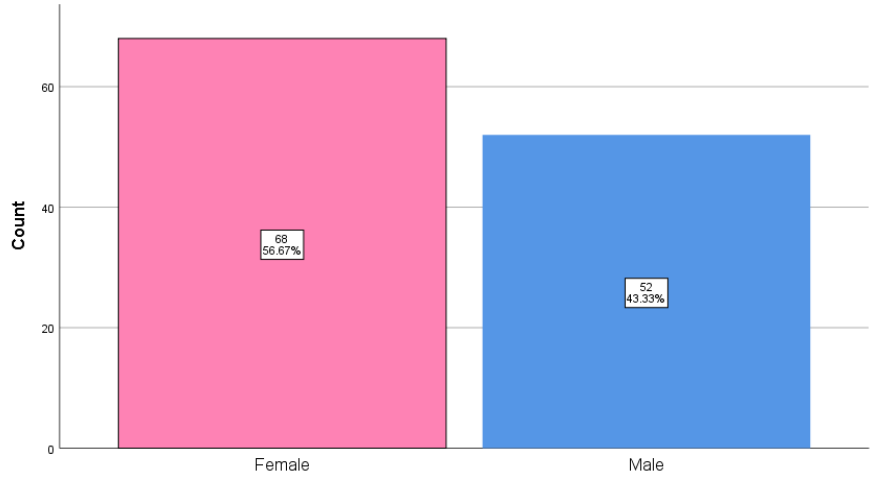


Figure 2. Sample gender distribution

Figure Two illustrates the gender distribution among the researched sample for the quantitative data. On the one hand, females are more significant in number, constituting 56.67%, while males, on the other hand, are 52 and make up 43.33% of the population.

Research Questions

Research Question 1:

RQ1: How do EFL students perceive the impact of teachers' personal and interpersonal characteristics on their learning experience in Moroccan higher education?

Research Question 2:

RQ2: To what extent does teachers' subject matter knowledge influence students' academic performance in EFL courses?

Research Question 3:

RQ3: How do students perceive the effectiveness of flexible teaching approaches compared to rigid textbook adherence in EFL education?

Research Design

The current study investigates students' perceptions of EFL teachers in terms of three skills: (1) Personal and interpersonal characteristics of students towards EFL teachers, (2) Teachers' subject matter knowledge, and (3) Teachers' approach to language teaching. To measure the impact of these three variables on students' performance, a 33-item questionnaire was distributed to 120 students, who were distributed unevenly on three levels: BA, MA, and PhD. The study also explores the implications of online learning after the period of the general lockdown.

Instruments

The first phase was a questionnaire-based survey (Questionnaire adapted (Kourieos & Evripidou, 2013) distributed to 120 EFL university students. The survey involved two parts. The first part was about the respondents' background information, including their gender and university

level. The second part consists of 35 Likert-scale items. Nine items addressed teachers' personal and interpersonal characteristics, six related to teachers' subject-matter knowledge (English Language), and 20 focused on language-teaching approaches. Before the students completed the questionnaire, the researchers provided brief instructions and pointed out no right or wrong answers. The students were given ample time to complete the questionnaires in class. The second phase follows a qualitative approach using focus groups, which aims to explain, interpret, and possibly add to quantitative findings(Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Three focus group interviews were conducted with the four students. Overall, 12 students from three university cycles (bachelor's, master's, and doctoral) participated in the focus groups. The focus groups lasted one and a half hours and were conducted in English.

Reliability test

Table 1: *Reliability Test*

Reliability Statistics

Cronbach's Alpha	N of Items
.908	33

Table One illustrates the reliability test conducted, which yielded a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.908 for the 33 items in the questionnaire. Cronbach's Alpha test is a measure of the internal consistency of survey items, and it indicates how closely they are related as a group. An alpha value of 0.908 suggests excellent reliability, meaning that the items on the questionnaire are highly consistent in measuring the underlying construct. The high level of reliability also indicates that the responses across the different items are stable and reflect a coherent assessment of the subject matter, providing strong support for the validity of the findings (Tavakol & Dennick, 2011).

Participants

For the quantitative data, 120 participants were EFL students from the Faculty of Letters and Human Sciences Dhar El Mahraz, Fes. These belong to the first, second, and third cycles, respectively. For the qualitative data, twelve students (seven males and five females) participated in focus group interviews, and they were chosen based on accessibility and interest in the study. The interview comprises three items, as illustrated in the data analysis chapter.

Findings

Section 1: Personal and Interpersonal Characteristics

The current section describes teachers' defining personal and interpersonal features from the students' viewpoint; it also sets the ground for the upcoming section that focuses on instructors' knowledge and personal approach to language teaching.

Research Question #1

RQ1: How do EFL students perceive the impact of teachers' personal and interpersonal characteristics on their learning experience in Moroccan higher education?

Students' perceptions of the impact of teachers' personal and interpersonal characteristics are high, ranging from agree to highly agree. Themes such as dialogism, active participation and student-centeredness placed high within the 1st section of the questionnaire, a section that is dedicated to understanding students' perceptions of teachers' teaching methods post-pandemic. This point is also well supported and illustrated by the following table and charts (see Table 2, Figures 3 & 4).

Table Two below presents the mean and standard deviation of students' personal and interpersonal characteristics towards their teachers. With a maximum value of 4.35 and a minimum value of 3.98, the table suggests that students place a high value on teachers who encourage active participation and dialogue in the classroom, with a significant portion also valuing fairness in treatment, though opinions on the latter are more mixed.

Table 2. *Personal and interpersonal characteristics*

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Be eager to help students in and outside the classroom	120	1	5	4.18	.820
Encourages students to express and discuss their ideas for the content of the lesson	120	1	5	4.35	.923
Praise effort	120	1	5	4.28	.871
Be friendly to students	120	1	5	4.21	.969
Treat students fairly regardless of achievement	120	1	5	3.98	1.148
Take into consideration students difficulties with the foreign language	120	1	5	4.22	.855
Express confidence in students language abilities	120	1	5	4.17	.876
Valid N (listwise)	120				

Example 1:

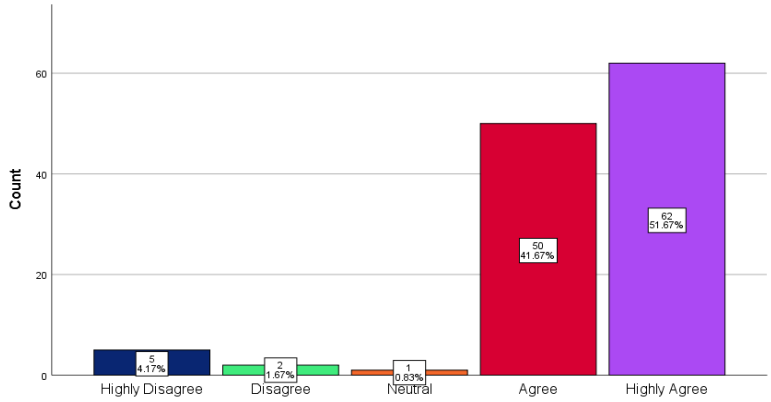


Figure 3. The Extent to which instructors encourage students to express and discuss their ideas

Figure Three represents how important it is for students to be encouraged by the teacher to express and discuss their ideas for the lesson's content. With a highly positive trend, 93.29 % of the students Highly agree and agree with the statement, one student remained neutral, two

participants disagreed, and the other five highly disagreed. The high mean score of 4.35 with a standard deviation of 0.923 indicates that most students agree on the importance of this trait in an effective teacher.

Example 2:

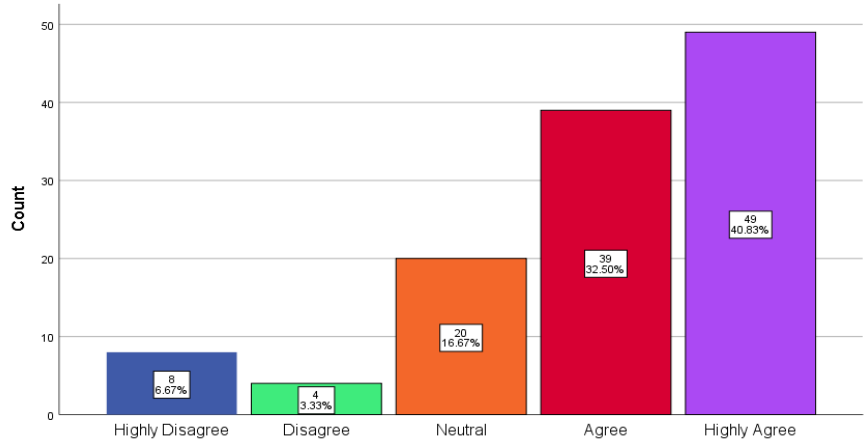


Figure 4. Instructors' frequency of treating students equally regardless of achievements

Figure Four indicates students' sentiments towards being fairly treated by teachers. Contrary to the previous chart, this present chart has a higher negative tone. Figure 4 demonstrates that twelve students ranged from highly disagree to disagree; 20 students were neutral about the statement, 32.50 % of students agreed with the statement, and 49 students highly agreed with the statement. A mean score of 3.98 and a standard deviation of 1.148 suggest some reservations about whether treating all students equally is always desirable.

Section 2: Subject Matter Knowledge

This section focuses on the teachers' modes of communicating knowledge with students and students' perceptions of the different methods utilized.

Research Question 2:

RQ2: To what extent does teachers' subject matter knowledge influence students' academic performance in EFL courses?

Subject matter knowledge of teachers, according to students, is placed second in terms of position. Respondents nearly unanimously vocalized the unimportance of native-like accents in teachers, whereas most agreed that having a broad vocabulary and more than basic grammar knowledge is represented i**n Table Three. As illustrated in Figure** Six, respondents' opinions Skewed towards the neutral stance when asked about the importance of native-like accents among instructors in influencing academic performance in EFL courses.

The table below presents descriptive statistics of the 2nd section of the questionnaire about instructors' subject knowledge. The mean values fluctuate from a minimal mean of 3.24 to a high mean of 4.28. at the same time, the standard deviation ranges from a mere 0.763 to 1.112 (see Table 3).

Table 3. *Subject matter knowledge*

Descriptive Statistics

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Use the FL Competently	120	1	5	4.00	.970
Have a broad vocabulary in the FL	120	1	5	4.20	.763
Have a native-like accent	120	1	5	3.42	1.112
Have a sound knowledge of the grammar	120	1	5	4.28	.799
Be familiar with language learning theories	120	1	5	4.06	.919
Be acquainted with the target culture	120	1	5	3.99	.874
Valid N (listwise)	120				

Example 1:

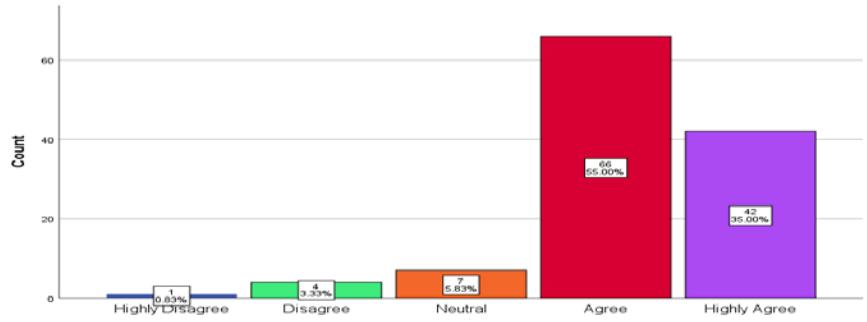


Figure 5. Participants' opinions on EFL instructors' capacity of having a broad vocabulary

Figure Five above presents an abnormal distribution of students' perceptions regarding the professors' linguistic capacity and vocabulary knowledge. Sixty-six students agreed with the statement, followed by 42 who highly agreed with the statement. Other items on the Likert scale ranked very low on the item, going from neutral to highly disagree, respectively. Seven participants were neutral, four disagreed, and one student highly disagreed with the statement.

Example 2:

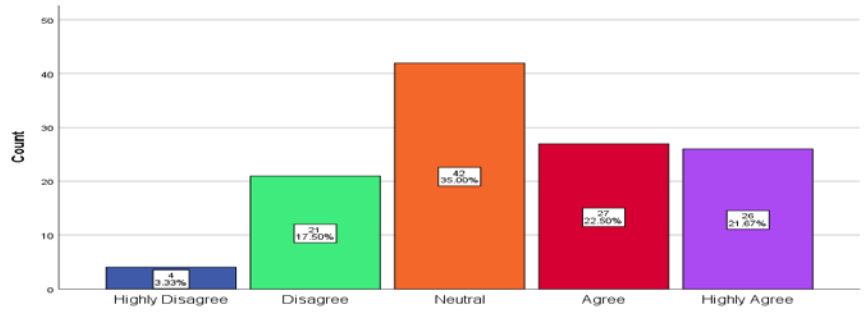


Figure 6. Respondents' insights on the instructor having a native-like accent

The Figure above demonstrates participants' attitudes towards teachers' proficiency and mainly native-like accents in the English language. As illustrated, most students remained neutral, while 27 and 26 participants agreed and highly agreed, respectively. Another 21 participants disagreed with the statement, while another four students highly disagreed. This shows that a native-like accent is not essential compared to the knowledge the teacher has. (See Figure 6).

Section 3: Approach to Language Learning

Research Question 3:

RQ3: How do students perceive the effectiveness of flexible teaching approaches compared to rigid textbook adherence in EFL education?

According to the questionnaire's item responses, students are marginally scattered and nearly similarly distributed among disagreeing, standing neutral grounds or agreeing to the statement claiming that teachers should follow the textbook rigidly, emphasizing the importance of creativity and outside-the-box teaching methods (See figure 7). In the same vein, students also showed a tendency to prefer being exposed and having access to topics related to real life and can relate to, as shown in Figure Eight.

Example 1:

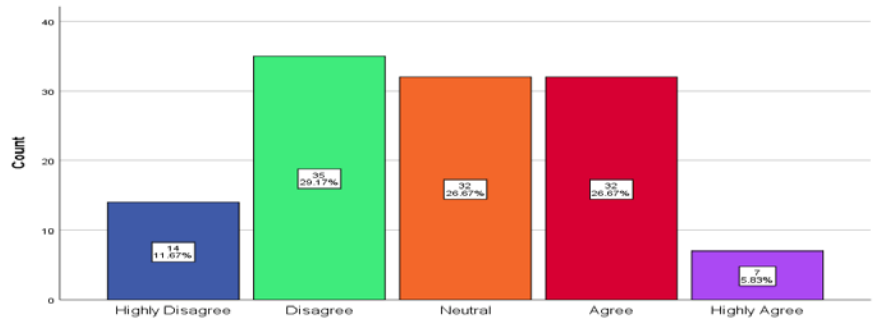


Figure 7. Participants' opinions on instructors following the textbook rigidly

The Figure above presents the extent to which teachers should rigidly follow the textbook or curriculum. As observed in Figure 7, the prevailing sentiment is neutrality towards the statement, with 35 respondents disagreeing, 32 remaining neutral, and the other 32 agreeing. Another 14 participants highly disagreed with the statement, while the remaining seven highly agreed.

Example 2:

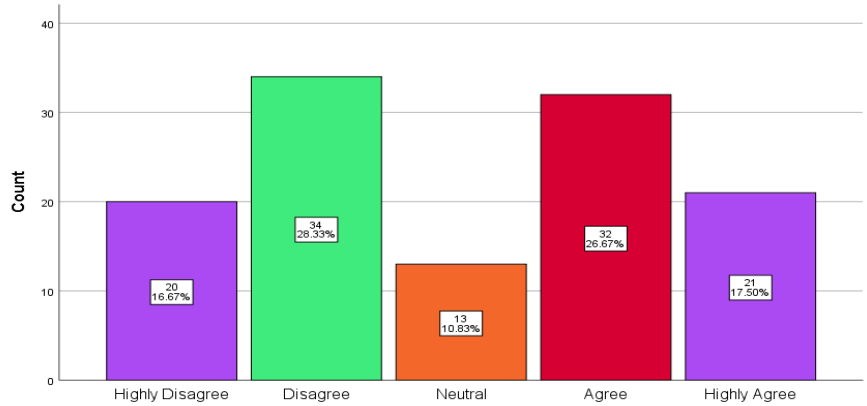


Figure 8. Respondents' opinions on the instructors' tendencies to correct grammar mistakes during communication

The chart on top presents participants' perceptions on whether the teacher should immediately correct students' mistakes when they commit mistakes. The answers presented in Figure Eight were highly dispersed and divided. An equal number of students chose highly disagree, disagree, agree, and highly agree, respectively, while only 13 respondents chose to be neutral (See Figure 8).

Example 3:

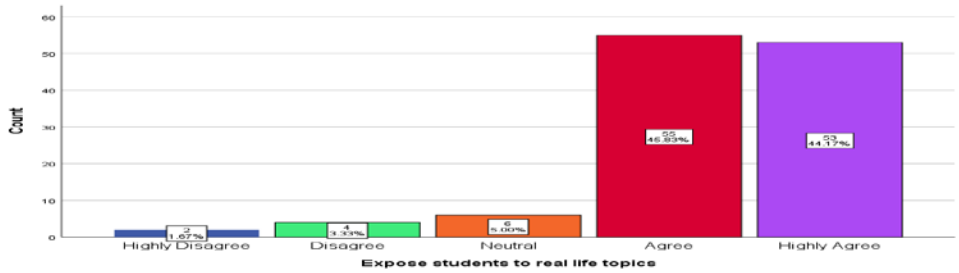


Figure 9: Respondents' Aptitude to Being Exposed to Real-Life Topics

Figure Nine embodies the extent to which the participants prefer to be exposed to real-life topics from their teachers. A large majority agreed followed by 53 who highly agreed to the statement. Six remained neutral, while six chose to disagree and highly disagree.

Qualitative Data



Figure 10: Word cloud representing Most used words during the interviews

As Illustrated above, Figure 10 presents the most frequent terms used in the interviews by the interviewees. Below is an extended thematic analysis of the interviews clustered by themes

Thematic Analysis

Theme 1: Importance of Teachers' Interpersonal Characteristics in Creating an Anxiety-Free Classroom Environment

1. ***Psychological Balance and Understanding****:*

Most of the students argued that teachers should be psychologically balanced to handle classroom dynamics, including students' anxiety, which should be met with a tremendous amount of understanding and tolerance.

2. ***Psycho-Emotional and Social Factors:***

Teachers' interpersonal characteristics considerably affect the rate and quality of classroom instruction and communication. However, skills in communication, listening, collaboration,

adaptability, empathy, and patience certainly will make a change and impact students' behaviours and outcomes.

3. Supportive Environment and Teaching Techniques:

Some respondents mentioned that positive and effective teaching techniques like humour, friendly relationships, supportive environments, and technology help minimize anxiety.

4. Affective Filters and Communication:

Some students revealed that interpersonal characteristics are the key to creating an anxiety-free learning environment as they open various communication channels.

Theme 2: Expectations of EFL Teachers' Subject-Matter Knowledge

1. Understanding Students' Psychology and Sociology:

A Respondent declared that teachers should have decent notions about students' learning, psychology, and sociology due to the diversity in the classroom.

2. Mastery of Language Basics and Teaching Methods:

Interviewees unanimously agreed that EFL teachers are responsible for ensuring that students learn the language basics, proper grammar, writing, and reading comprehension. Furthermore, The ability to explain concepts without just translating is emphasized.

3. Engagement and Literacy:

A respondent mentioned the importance of teachers engaging in teaching by helping students gain literacy and learn how to inquire about and discover new things.

Theme 3: Teachers' Success in Presenting, Explaining, and Evaluating Content

1. Challenges in Presenting Knowledge:

The idea that teachers relying on old and outdated resources hinders effective content presentation has been frequently mentioned.

2. Use of Translation vs. Immersion:

Students perceive Translation as a less effective teaching method as it does not teach a language.

3. Traditional vs. Technology-Savvy Teachers (Respondent 3):

Learners find that traditional methods are contrasted with modern, technology-driven teaching, while the latter is seen as more effective in facilitating learning.

Discussion

The quantitative data revealed that students highly value personal and interpersonal characteristics in their EFL teachers. Traits such as encouraging student participation, providing support outside of class, and fostering a positive learning environment received mean scores ranging from 3.98 to 4.35, indicating their importance to students. However, the data also showed mixed opinions on the fairness of treatment, with some students expressing reservations, which suggests the complexity of addressing diverse student needs while maintaining equitable treatment. Regarding subject matter knowledge, teachers were rated highly for their command of vocabulary and grammar, with mean scores of 4.20 and 4.28, respectively. However, the perceived importance of a native-like accent was rated lower, with a mean score of 3.42. These findings suggest that students value their instructors' practical knowledge and teaching skills more than their ability to mimic a native accent, reflecting a shift in what is considered necessary in language instruction.

The results also indicated a preference among students for teaching approaches that are flexible and responsive to their needs. Many students agreed that strict textbook adherence is less desirable and strongly preferred exposure to real-life topics during lessons (Anderton et al., 2021; Srinivasan et al., 2021). The responses regarding immediate error correction were varied,

indicating diverse preferences for feedback methods, with no clear consensus among students. Qualitative data further supported these findings, with thematic analysis revealing the vitality of teachers' interpersonal skills in creating a positive, stress-free classroom environment. Students emphasized the need for teachers to be knowledgeable in language content and pedagogical methods, particularly those involving modern technology, suggesting that effective teaching in the EFL context requires a balance between traditional subject knowledge and innovative, student-centred teaching practices.

The current study's findings show the essential role of interpersonal characteristics in shaping students' perceptions and attitudes toward EFL teacher effectiveness (Belghmi et al., 2024). Throughout the questionnaire and interviews, students placed significant value on teachers who focus on students' active participation in the classroom, fairness in dealing with different students, and teachers who offer support outside the classroom. The findings further highlight the importance of teachers creating an engaging, supportive, and all-inclusive learning environment to actively and positively enhance students' learning outcomes. However, the mixed perceptions of fairness in treatment suggest that some students appreciate equitable treatment, while others find it challenging for teachers to balance diverse student needs while maintaining fairness (Mounjid et al., 2021). In this regard, Mafa-Theledi (2024) found the following:

> Regarding subject matter knowledge, students evaluated their teachers highly in vocabulary and grammar, which reflects the importance of teachers' content knowledge for an effective online teaching. The lower ratings for native-like competencies indicate that students prioritize practical teaching abilities over linguistic perfection. These findings challenge traditional assumptions that highly value proficiency in language teaching. (P. 5)

Lastly, participants preferred a flexible curriculum over rigidly following textbooks and favoured an adaptive, student-centred approach vis-à-vis teaching approaches and students' preferences. Additionally, the results from the qualitative data reveal that while students appreciate the integration of technology in teaching, they also feel burdened with using outdated resources. The latter highlights the need for teachers to stay updated with current educational technologies and methodologies to effectively engage students in the digital age (Rafi et al., 2022).

Conclusion

In summary, the current study demonstrates that students value a combination of strong interpersonal skills, solid subject matter knowledge, and flexible, modern teaching approaches in their EFL teachers. While students appreciate fairness and support from their instructors, they also recognize the challenges teachers face in balancing these aspects with the diverse needs of their students. The lower importance placed on native-like accents highlights a shift in priorities, with students favouring practical teaching skills over linguistic perfection.

Furthermore, the implications for practice suggest that EFL teachers should focus on creating a supportive and engaging learning environment, relying on a number of teaching methods that extend beyond traditional lecturing and fixed textbook adherence. Additionally, there is a need for ongoing professional development, particularly in areas related to digital literacy and innovative teaching practices, to ensure that teachers remain effective in the evolving educational landscape.

Recommendations for Future Research

For future research, exploring how cultural and educational backgrounds influence students' perceptions of teaching effectiveness would be valuable. Additionally, examining the long-term effects of online learning on student outcomes in EFL contexts, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, could provide further insights into the evolving dynamics of language education.

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