

Students' Perceptions of Effective EFL Teachers in University Settings in Cyprus

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Abstract

This study sought to identify what characteristics and teaching behaviours describe effective EFL University teachers as perceived by Cypriot students. Data were collected by means of a questionnaire and focus group interviews. Findings have provided evidence that effective language teaching seems to be related to a more learner-centred approach to language learning and teaching, which, in turn, assumes a more assisting, mediating role for the language teacher. According to the participants of this study, an effective EFL teacher is no longer considered one who has a directive and authoritarian role in the learning process but one who takes into consideration his/her students' individual differences, language anxiety, abilities and interests and design learning environments accordingly. Language teachers' skills in using technology and engaging students in meaningful classroom interactions by involving them in group tasks designed around real life topics and authentic language use have also been emphasised. Participants' views call for EFL teachers in university settings to move beyond the traditional focus-on-form approach to language teaching which views language learning as an individual activity, to the adoption of the communicative approach to language teaching which acknowledges the social aspect of learning and as such, it depends upon meaningful interactions with peers. EFL teachers working in tertiary education should use these findings as a yardstick to better understand themselves and the needs of their students for the enhancement of the learning process.

Keywords: effective teaching, university EFL teachers, students' perceptions

1. Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that the most effective pathway to improved student learning outcomes is the quality of teaching, especially teachers' ability to motivate and facilitate such learning. According to Williams and Burden (1997) learner motivation is seen as one of the most powerful influences on learning and in the case of a foreign language, a fundamental factor in FL achievement.

Language teachers need to make informed decisions on how to implement, cultivate and maintain motivation throughout the academic year to enhance learning; in order to do that, they really need to look into how their students perceive effective language teaching. These perceptions may encompass students' preferences as to how their instruction should be delivered (Lightbown & Spada, 2008), their perceptions of the teacher's role and their own in the learning process, their beliefs about language learning (Tudor, 1996) and their beliefs about the knowledge required by an effective language teacher (Kalebic, 2005; Borg, 2006). As Wenden points out, learners' perceptions about effective language learning seem to consciously or unconsciously guide their actions which promote their own learning and most importantly influence their positive reaction or resistance and discontent to teaching activities (cited in Tudor, 1986: 50). Therefore, an identification of these perceptions have an obvious relevance to understanding their expectations of the course, their commitment to the class as well as to the opportunities they should be provided with to be successful and satisfied with their language programme (Horwitz, 1988).

2. Rationale

There is a critical need to better understand how specific groups of language learners in particular institutional and sociocultural contexts characterise effective language teachers (Borg, 2006). Building on the work of Borg (2006), this study attempts to define 'effectiveness' in English language teaching as perceived by University language students in Cyprus. Identifying what an effective EFL teacher is in the Cyprus context is believed to bring about improvements that might help create a positive and academically productive atmosphere in the university classroom. It is hoped that the outcomes of this research will be particularly informative to lecturers, course designers and teacher trainers working in tertiary education in the field of FL teaching.

3. Literature Review

Over the decades, numerous studies on teaching effectiveness and the behaviours of effective teachers especially as perceived by students in different contexts worldwide have been published both outside (Dunkin & Biddle, 1974, Feiman-Nemser & Buchmann, 1986; Brophy & Good, 1986, Shulman, 1987; Neil 1991; Murray, 1991; Shulman, 2002; Lowman, 1997; Kyriakides, Campbell, & Christofidou, 2002; Koutsoulis, 2003; Thomson, 2008) and inside (Brosh, 1996; Borg, 2006; Park & Lee, 2006; Chen & Lin, 2009; Barnes, 2010; Lee, 2010; Chen 2012; Wichadee & Orawiwatnakul, 2012) the domain of foreign language education. Although information from studies and the relevant literature on general teaching effectiveness can provide useful insights into the present study as certain characteristics that describe effective teaching are common among teachers, there are others which differ among them depending on the subject they teach. Due to space limitations, this paper makes reference only to a number of studies which are specific to FL teachers.

Influenced by the work of Borg (2006), Lee (2010) investigated the distinctive characteristics of EFL teachers, and identified three areas which distinguish language teaching from the teaching of other subjects. These were the nature of the subject-matter, the teaching approach and the teacher's personality. The first area was perceived by Japanese EFL college students as unique to EFL teachers as the latter are expected to use the target language as the medium of instruction, which according to Borg (2006), it is a medium that students do not yet understand. This inevitably places more demands on a language teacher's proficiency in the target language and consequently on his ability to simplify his language or adjust it according to the learning situation and his students' level.

A language teacher's command of the target language was also highlighted by other relevant studies. Brosh (1996) found that a group of Israeli high school students perceived good language proficiency as being an essential element which enables the teacher to conduct his lesson without inhibitions, fear, and insecurity, as well as to motivate and challenge the students. Other important characteristics identified in this study were the teacher's ability to teach comprehensibly, deliver interesting lessons and treat students fairly. Similar findings were also found in Park and Lee's study (2006) who investigated the characteristics of effective English teachers as perceived by high school students in Korea. Although variables such as gender and performance seemed to have contributed significantly in the way students ranked certain characteristics, they all ranked pedagogical knowledge the highest and agreed on the importance of reading and speaking proficiency, the teacher's ability to arouse students' interest in learning English and build their self-confidence. The results of the aforementioned studies are further supported by Wichadee and Orawiwatnakul's study (2012) which indicated that both low and high proficiency students placed great emphasis on organisational and communication skills and on the teacher's good proficiency of English. A teacher's pleasant and supportive personality as well as the use of more interesting activities, were also reported to be crucial in creating a good learning atmosphere. Findings from a study conducted by Chen (2012) were grouped into two broad categories relating to personal trait-related and classroom teaching-related characteristics. The former mainly included emotion, kindness, fairness, lenience and responsibility, while the latter category was concerned with skills and techniques of lesson delivery and error correction, language used in teaching, classroom activity organisation and classroom atmosphere creation. Barnes' study (2010) which examined students' beliefs about the attributes of effective EFL lecturers in a Korean University setting was also particularly informative and supportive of the other studies mentioned above. Students emphasised the importance of the language teacher's friendly and supportive personality, arguing that it contributes significantly to reducing fear and language anxiety and promoting learning by making students feel valued and comfortable with using the language in FL classroom. Lesson delivery was also considered of utmost importance with particular emphasis on the use of various teaching methods and teaching materials and the employment of group work. Similarly, Bell (2005) and Lee (2010) assert that the language teacher should maximize student involvement by making use of group work and exposing students to more communicative activities. However, the need to engage students in such activities in a language they are not fully competent suggests a more tolerant stance on the part of the teacher towards learners' linguistic errors (Brosh, 1996; Borg,

2006; Lee, 2010).

A review of studies which have been carried out on the characteristics and qualities of effective EFL teachers on a number of variables, have shown that despite the differences in the level of importance given to various features, there seems to be a strong consensus on the types of knowledge and behaviours that language teachers need to possess and display. Among these are competence in the target language along with good communication skills, ability to deliver the lesson in meaningful and engaging ways, the use of group work to encourage greater degree of learner involvement, ability to maintain a motivating and supportive learning environment and tolerance to learners' linguistic errors.

4. Methodology

This exploratory study employed a mixed-method sequential approach to data collection and analysis (Tashakkori & Teddie, 1998; Tashakkori, 2003), and was carried out in two phases between November, 2012 and February, 2013.

4.1 Sample

The participants of this study were 110 first-years EFL undergraduate students in two private universities in Cyprus who majored in four different academic disciplines (Business, Accounting and Finance, Primary Education, and Maritime Studies). Sixty-eight male and forty-two female students took part in the survey. Eighteen of these students (eight male and ten female) were chosen for the focus group interviews based on their academic discipline (we wanted to include students from all academic disciplines), accessibility and interest in the study.

4.2 Instruments and Procedure

The first phase of this study consisted of a questionnaire-based survey administered to 110 EFL university students. The questionnaire consisted of two parts. The first part was about the respondents' background information including gender, language proficiency and department of study. The second part consisted of 35 Likert-scale questions. Nine questions concentrated on personal and interpersonal characteristics of teachers, six were related to the subject-matter knowledge of the teachers (English Language), and twenty focused on language teaching approaches (c.f. Appendix A: Questionnaire). Before the students completed the questionnaire, the researchers had given brief instructions and pointed out that there were, no right or wrong answers. It was also made sure that the students understood that their answers should reflect on their beliefs, thoughts and feelings. Ample time was given to the students to complete the questionnaire in class and it was translated into Greek to avoid possible problems in understanding what it asked. The translation of the questionnaire from English into Greek was also reviewed by two independent translator-linguists to make sure that the translation was accurate.

The second phase was conducted within a qualitative approach using focus groups, which aimed at explaining, interpreting and possibly adding to the quantitative findings (Creswell, 2003). Three focus group interviews were carried out each of which engaged six students. Overall, 18 students took part in the focus groups coming from all four academic disciplines. The focus groups lasted between one and one and a half hours and they were conducted in the students' first language.

4.3 Data Analysis

In terms of data analysis, quantitative data were analysed by using the SPSS statistical software. For more rigorous results, a t-test was applied with gender as the independent variable and ANOVA was also applied with two other independent variables (language proficiency and students' major). These tests aimed at examining whether any of these variables may have influenced students' perceptions of the effective characteristics of an EFL teacher. Qualitative data were recorded and transcribed into Greek and were analysed thematically according to Braun and Clarke (2006) and Dorney (2007). Useful extracts, which were translated into English for the needs of this article, were also reviewed by independent translator-linguists to ensure their preciseness.

5. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the questionnaire were grouped into three separate thematic areas to make its analysis more comprehensive and conclusive. More specifically, the findings were grouped into (a) Personal and Interpersonal characteristics, (b) subject-matter knowledge, and (c) approach to language teaching. The tables below demonstrate data relating the overall mean score of students' perceptions related to the three categories mentioned above and are followed by the interview results which tend to support and/or add to what was revealed by the questionnaire analysis.

5.1 Personal and Interpersonal Characteristics

This sub-section outlines and discusses the findings associated with aspects of the teacher's personality and his attitudes towards the students.

Table 1. Personal and interpersonal characteristics

An effective language teacher should:	N	Mean	SD	Rank
1. Be eager to help students in and outside the classroom.	110	4.44	.71	2
2. Encourages students to express and discuss their ideas for the content of the lesson.	110	4.30	.73	6
3. Praise effort	110	4.32	.82	5
4. Be friendly to students.	110	4.52	.68	1
5. Treat students fairly regardless of achievement.	110	4.33	.87	4
6. Take into consideration students' difficulties with the Foreign Language.	110	4.39	.79	3
7. Express confidence in students' language abilities.	110	4.28	.77	7
8. Be open-minded.	110	4.10	.86	8
9. Use authority to maintain discipline.	110	3.36	1.03	-

Table 1 presents data pertaining to the overall mean score of students' perceptions on personal and interpersonal characteristics of effective language teachers. All items (1-8) which related to teachers' helpful, supportive and encouraging personality were rated higher than 4 whereas the last item (9) which was associated with the teacher's authoritarian role received a lower score, indicating that such characteristic was not desired by EFL university students. Among the eight items, the mean scores could be arranged in order of importance as shown in the column entitled *Rank* above.

The questionnaire results were also supported by the interviews. A common theme among the participants' comments was the importance of EFL teachers' interpersonal characteristics in creating an anxiety free classroom environment where students would feel comfortable to interact with peers and express their ideas freely without the fear of being criticised for their language mistakes. Nine respondents claimed that while they felt that exposure to communicative activities would help them enhance their speaking skills, at the same time they admitted that such activities prevented them from participating in the lesson. Four of these participants stated that they often feared not making themselves understood because of their limited vocabulary in the target language. The rest of these participants said that because of their previous language learning experiences which focused mainly on grammar, they have hardly ever been given the opportunity to engage in classroom communicative activities which is why they have always lacked the confidence in expressing themselves in English orally. The fear of making important language mistakes and being criticised by the teacher or laughed at by their peers was also addressed by the other five participants. The teacher's role in alleviating this language anxiety and lack of confidence felt by students was perceived to be of utmost importance. As one participant explained, an authoritarian teacher can only deepen this fear and consequently discourage students from trying out the new language which was reported to be an effective way of improving their language production. She commented on an earlier language learning experience:

"I remember always being stressed and anxious at the lesson, fearing that the teacher was going to ask me something I wouldn't be able to answer. She was so strict, disciplined and critical of what we said that I personally didn't feel comfortable participating and that really affected my learning as it stopped me from participating and concentrating on the lesson".

Helpful and encouraging EFL teachers were highly appreciated mainly by student-teachers who argued that teachers who are willing to help and support students, especially weak ones, both inside and outside the classroom are more likely to develop a good rapport with their students which is seen as having a significant effect on learning and achievement (Davis, 2001; Park & Lee, 2006; Chen & Lin, 2009; Barnes, 2010; Wichadee & Orawiatnakul, 2012). EFL teachers were also expected to be encouraging rather than strict and critical. As two participants commented EFL teachers should be aware of their students' worries and understanding of their difficulties with the foreign language and encourage them to keep trying by praising effort rather than emphasising their mistakes. One of them explained that the teacher's ability to create a safe atmosphere for

students to speak in English would enable students to take risks and could also be an incentive for them to exert more effort and do their best to improve their English. Another way of alleviating language anxiety was also reported by two other participants who argued that effective EFL teachers should first assign small group work for negotiation of meaning, which is likely to be less threatening and intimidating for language learners, a view also supported by Bell (2005). Finally, another student pointed out that one of the most important characteristics of an effective EFL teacher is his enthusiasm and dedication for the lesson, arguing that language teachers, especially at university level where students are expected to reach a higher level of language competence, should make the best of the classroom time to engage their students in meaningful tasks rather than do tasks just for the sake of the syllabus. Borg's study (2006) provided evidence that enthusiasm is an essential characteristic for EFL teachers in order to support learner motivation and interest in learning English in an EFL context, where exposure to the language is largely limited to the classroom.

5.2 Subject-Matter Knowledge

The following sub-section summarises the findings which focus on the EFL teacher's competence of the target language and awareness of language learning theories.

Table 2. Subject matter knowledge

An effective language teacher should:	N	Mean	SD	Rank
1. Use the FL competently.	110	4.47	.73	3
2. Have a broad vocabulary in the FL.	110	4.61	.70	1
3. Have a native-like accent.	110	3.55	1.04	-
4. Have a sound knowledge of the grammar.	110	4.60	.60	2
5. Be familiar with language learning theories.	110	4.13	.84	4
6. Be acquainted with the target culture.	110	3.66	1.14	-

Regarding the second thematic area, the overall mean scores of students' responses outlined in table 2, show that students rated most of the items (1, 2, 4, 5) slightly higher than the items in table 1, which may be an indication of which characteristics are more highly valued. However, two of the items (3, 6) received a score below 4, showing that students may not consider native-like accent and acquaintance with the target culture as important aspects of a FL teacher's subject-matter knowledge as his knowledge about and competence in the target language. It is also interesting to note that the teacher's sound knowledge of grammar was perceived as more important as his ability to use the language competently. An assumption supporting some of these notions, can be accounted for on the basis of the participants' previous language learning experiences, considering that they are all Cypriots, whose language education background focused on the instruction of the formal aspects of the language, that is, on grammar and vocabulary development whereas there was limited to no reference to the target culture. Such findings indicate that there is a strong link between participants' language learning experiences and their conceptions of effective language teaching. The four items that were endorsed at a high level can be arranged in order of importance as shown by the *Rank* column above.

During the interviews when participants were asked what subject-matter knowledge they expected their EFL teachers to have, they all agreed that language proficiency should be a requirement at university level for various reasons. There was a great consensus among participants (N: 14) that the EFL teacher's linguistic competence is closely related to his confidence in using the target language extensively and competently in class, hence to his ability to provide students with rich language input and maximize opportunities for language acquisition. One participant also said that only if the teacher has a high degree of oral proficiency will he be able to expose students to meaningful activities and thus enable them to interact with their peers, encouraging purposeful and genuine use of the FL. Two participants stated that while they greatly valued the teacher's language proficiency, they felt that his ability to adjust his language to the students' level was more important because it is this ability which would help him make his lesson understood and alleviate any signs of language anxiety that may exist as commented in the previous section. Allied to this view, other studies (Buchmann, 1984; Brosh, 1996; Park and Lee, 2006; Wichadee and Orawiwatnakul, 2012) argue that a sound command of foreign languages gave teachers the linguistic freedom necessary to personalise lessons according to students' proficiency levels and learning styles.

5.3 Approach to Language Teaching

The third category addresses aspects of an EFL teacher's approach which concentrate on how the new content is introduced, explained and evaluated and how the instructional material and activities can be best used to facilitate learning.

Table 3. Approach to language teaching

An effective language teacher should:	N	Mean	SD	Rank
1. Follow the textbook rigidly.	110	2.36	1.08	-
2. Make frequent use of other materials.	110	4.28	.77	1
3. Integrate computer-aided instruction into the FL classroom.	110	3.65	1.25	-
4. Set activities which expose students to the target culture.	110	3.35	1.12	-
5. Design or select materials according to students' major.	110	3.88	1.12	-
6. Simplify his/her language to facilitate comprehension.	110	3.70	1.35	-
7. Expose students to real life topics.	110	4.21	.86	2
8. Use recasts to correct students' mistakes.	110	3.91	.88	-
9. Use the FL as the predominant means of classroom communication.	109	3.72	.98	-
10. Provide opportunities for students to use the FL beyond the classroom setting.	110	3.81	.99	-
11. Not grade language production (speaking/writing) primarily for grammatical accuracy.	110	3.32	1.15	-
12. Set activities which require students to interact with each other in the FL.	109	4.13	.77	4
13. Grade written assignments predominantly for effort and content.	109	3.94	.94	-
14. Set activities which require students to work in pairs or small groups.	110	4.20	.90	3
15. Use activities which draw learners' attention to specific grammatical features.	110	3.75	.80	-
16. Thoroughly explain new grammar rules before asking students to practice the relevant structure.	110	4.07	1.02	5
17. Grade written assignments predominantly for grammatical accuracy.	110	3.29	1.17	-
18. Correct students immediately after making a grammar mistake during communicative activities.	110	3.67	1.20	-
19. Address errors by immediately providing explanation as to why students' responses are incorrect.	110	3.94	4.72	-
20. Set activities which require students to work individually.	110	3.63	1.06	-

As shown in table 3, only 5 items out of 20 received a mean score higher than 4. Among the five items, the mean scores could be arranged in order of importance as follows: make frequent use of other materials, expose students to real life topics, set activities which require students to work in pairs or in groups, set activities which require students to interact with each other, and thoroughly explain new grammar rules before asking students to practice the relevant structure. On the contrary, characteristics like following the textbook rigidly, setting activities which expose students to the target culture, grading written assignments predominantly for grammatical accuracy and not grading language production primarily for grammatical accuracy were at the bottom of the ranking list.

What was perceived significant by students in the questionnaire results above were to a certain extent similar to what the interviews revealed. One of the major concerns of the participants, which, was mentioned frequently in the interviews was their attending uninteresting classes, which followed the same teaching routine and generally lacked diversity. They clearly pointed out that they expected their language teacher to provide a more

challenging and fruitful learning environment which would cater for their needs and interests and would therefore motivate them to participate. Four dimensions of effective EFL classes which emerged from the respondents' comments in the interviews were a) limited use of coursebooks and use of other material, b) exposure to real-life topics, c) activities which require students to interact with each other and d) error correction techniques.

5.3.1 Limited Use of Course Books and Use of Other Material

Most of the students interviewed (N: 14) said that they expected their English language course to be something different from their secondary (lower and upper) English language classes. They admitted that when they are given course books that are similarly designed as their past learning materials, they tend to quickly lose their interest and motivation to focus on those books. Such finding is supported by Harmer (2007) who asserts that if the content of the course book is uninteresting or repetitive, sustaining the motivation of the students will be problematic for the teacher no matter how hard they may try. As one student commented, "Course books are very limited and limiting following the same structure and the topics are always on films, animals, technology and so on. I think as university students we don't need course books, but a variety of other more authentic material".

In a similar manner, another student commented that course books are based on what is acceptable worldwide and what everyone may find interesting: "the same course book can be used in Italy, Germany and Sweden...so what we find in it are usually acceptable for all, nothing that can stir you up a little and they are always repetitive". Another student as yet pointed out that course books should only be used for the learning of grammar while everything else including reading comprehension, vocabulary advancement, speaking and listening skills improvement should be done through the use of authentic language either using what is found in the press or the internet. The same student also added that the use of more authentic materials presuppose an excellent command of the target language by the teacher in order to provide synonyms and better explanations of less common words and therefore be less intimidated to use articles from the internet or the press. What was stated here can be aligned directly with two items used in the questionnaire. Following the textbook (table 2, item 2) was something that the students strongly disliked, which achieved a very low mean score (2.36), whereas having a teacher with a broad vocabulary in the FL (table 3, item 1) was desirable achieving a mean score higher than 4.

It is apparent from what was stated by the interviewees that using EFL course books can make university students feel bored due to the sameness or repetitiveness of the lessons and activities they had already done in secondary school, which is why they expressed the need to be exposed to other more authentic materials which will enable them to use the language in more meaningful contexts. As Tudor (1996: 231) points out, the use of a variety of other materials deriving from the learners' occupational concerns or from their affective/cultural interests indicates a move in the direction of a more learner-centred approach to teaching.

In relation to this study, particularly beneficial and motivating was perceived the use of YouTube by seven interviewees who emphasised its usefulness in helping them improve their language skills and increase their vocabulary. As one participant commented:

"Using YouTube in the classroom is great fun and we get to learn a lot, not only because we're exposed to different kinds of English as our teacher keeps telling us, but because it's interesting and informative. If the teacher prepares well, a YouTube lesson can generate discussions, it can improve our listening skills and with the teacher's exercises it can enhance our vocabulary".

Likewise, another student commented that using YouTube shifts the attention to a "third person, who is neither a student, nor the teacher" and that "it's like there is a new person every time we use it in the classroom" which changes both the students and teacher's roles because both "get to learn things at the same time and the lesson becomes genuinely interesting". The same student explained that she likes both kinds of lessons based on YouTube either when they are prepared by the teacher or not, because "an unprepared YouTube video by the teacher places both the teacher and the students in exactly the same position and the classroom atmosphere changes because none of us knows what to expect which makes it much more interesting". She explained that this is only feasible if the language teacher is confident enough with the target language.

Participants' comments in relation to the benefits of YouTube are supported by Watkins and Wilkins (2011), who points out that YouTube is a valuable tool through which multiple foreign language skills can be improved. It can enhance conversation, listening and pronunciation skills and it can also be used as realia to stimulate cultural lessons, enhance exposure to World Englishes, and promote authentic vocabulary development, a view also supported by Ruddell (1997) and Pilgreen (2000).

This finding was also reflected on the questionnaire findings given that a large number of students would prefer

their teachers to integrate computer-aided instruction into the classroom (table 3, item 3), even though the mean score was slightly lower than 4 (3.65) and also to make frequent use of other material (table 3, item 2), which achieved a mean score higher than 4.

5.3.2 Exposure to Real Life Topics

Reference was also made by 9 interviewees from the Maritime and Business focus groups to the use of controversial issues in class with particular emphasis on taboo topics. They pointed out that they are not at school, but university and therefore such topics should be promoted rather than excluded from the EFL classroom since they are motivating, related to them and also part of their lives. As one participant commented:

“We are adult learners and therefore I don't see the point in keep talking about the environment, movies, fashion and so on, like we did at school. This is our chance to talk about something new, something controversial, something that is related to us”.

Similarly, another student indicated that topics such as religion, sexuality, and politics remain interesting and are a source for genuine discussions because the students do not “use the foreign language just for the sake of it, but to express their opinions, beliefs and feelings”. It was also stated by the same student that the way teachers perceive and approach such topics is of utmost importance arguing that the latter must be exculpated from the beliefs of the past and embrace the students' generation to overcome the difficulty of discussing about such topics. As Vrbova (2006) stated, turning a blind eye to the development in then society may not be the most effective response. Such view has important implications for the teacher who is expected to be both open-minded as well as flexible in varying his lesson and adjusting it to his students' interests. These findings are also reported in Huang's study (2010) and are also consistent with the questionnaire findings (Table 1, items 2 and 9) which both obtained a mean score higher than 4.

5.3.3 Interaction among Students in the Target Language

Another dimension related to the teacher's approach reported by the majority of the participants (N:13) which was also one of the four most highly rated items in the relevant category outlined in the questionnaire was the promotion of classroom interaction among students (4.13) with specific reference to the use of group work also rated very high (4.20).

Although the majority of the participants (N: 15) did not reject the usefulness of being taught the grammar, they placed great importance on communicative activities which require them to interact with each other using the target language. It is worth mentioning that this was an area that was highlighted by all student-teachers for whom the English classes are the only opportunity they have to interact with each other using the target language unlike the rest of the participants. One student-teacher argued that “if you don't use the language in meaningful interaction, there is no way of learning it. Grammar is also important but only if you put it in practice”. Another student-teacher also added that because of the language policy that was promoted in Cyprus until recently, most students still encounter problems communicating in English. She explained that if students were involved in classroom interactions, they would be ‘forced’ to learn new vocabulary in order to get their message across. Nine participants also found interactive activities more interesting than the most commonly used fill-in-the gaps grammar-based exercises, which as they claimed they are always presented to them isolated from context and at the same time they provide no challenge.

The use of group work in the EFL classroom was also perceived by a significant number of interviewees (N: 13) as being particularly effective in encouraging a greater degree of learner involvement. The enormous potential offered by classroom interaction and group work reported by the participants of this study is supported by other relevant studies in the field (Bell, 2005; Lee, 2010; Barnes, 2010).

Three participants felt that during group work everybody has the chance to speak and participate, even the timid students who are likely to feel more comfortable interacting with the few members of their group rather than with the whole class. Another participant commented on the social and collaborative aspects of group work saying that when working in a group, it feels like you belong to a small community whose efforts will be eventually presented. This perspective is in line with Jacobs, Power, and Loh (2002) who argue that teachers who use cooperative learning are believed to create a more effective environment for learning which helps students achieve their learning potentials.

Similarly, another student explained that students can benefit from group work only if there is some kind of presentation, poster or assignment in the end. As Richards and Lockhart (2006) argue, “group activities need a goal, procedures and a time frame to accomplish them, if they are to be focused and productive” (p. 153). A different view was expressed by two other participants who pointed to the teacher's role in making group work a

good learning opportunity for students. They said that the teacher needs to be skilled enough to form groups based on students' personalities and abilities, making sure that shy and weak students will be encouraged to participate in a less stressful environment which calls for cooperation with their peers to achieve a final goal set by the teacher. This view was found to coincide with item 6 (table 1) in the questionnaire which achieved a mean score of 4.39, indicating that effective EFL teachers should take into consideration students' difficulties with the FL and adjust their teaching accordingly. The above results are in line with Richards and Lockhart (2006) who argue that "while learners may have individual preferences for the kind of interaction and style they favour in the classroom, the interactional dynamics of a classroom are largely a product of choices the teacher makes about the learning arrangements he or she sets up within a lesson" (p. 146). They assert that teachers should have the knowledge and skills to place students in groups taking into consideration the size of the group, the purpose of the activity and each student's language abilities.

5.3.4 Error Correction during Communicative Activities

The students' comments in this study regarding error correction during communicative activities have provided a better understanding of how individual students seem to benefit from different approaches to error correction. Seven participants agreed that they preferred to be corrected on the spot because only in this way would they raise awareness of their mistakes and avoid doing them again, a finding which is corroborated in two other relevant studies (Schulz, 1996; Ganjabi, 2011). One of them also explained that there is no point of being engaged in communicative activities, aiming to improve your spoken language if the teacher doesn't correct your mistakes.

However, there were students who did not share the same view. One student explained that because her fluency in English is limited and she may make a lot of mistakes while talking, she would not like to be corrected on the spot in the presence of others, but preferably later on in a review of errors when the teacher can explain all errors noticed, after everyone has finished talking. Similarly, another student asserted that the teacher should not correct you as you speak because he interrupts your thoughts and prevents you from continuing and you get the impression that the teacher is not actually listening to what you are saying but he is actually only paying attention to the way you use language rather than your ideas and effort to speak. Another student felt that teachers should correct errors on the spot selectively explaining that if the meaning doesn't change or the grammar or vocabulary error is not that serious, then perhaps correction at the time of speaking is not necessary.

Similar findings were also observed in the questionnaire results. Taking into consideration students' difficulties with the FL was an item which was highly rated in the questionnaire and also strongly commented on in the interviews. Additionally, the complexity of the issue of correcting errors and the different student attitudes towards it were also reflected on the questionnaire results in the sense that questionnaire item 18 and 19 in table 3 which refer to addressing errors immediately and providing explanations achieved mean scores that did not exceed 4 but were relatively close to it (3.65 and 3.94 respectively).

As Azar and Molavi (2013) indicated, in order to have a successful learning and teaching process it is necessary to consider EFL learners' reactions and feelings towards oral error correction and to understand that they have different preferences in the way they like to be corrected. Understanding these preferences is of paramount importance in the teaching and learning process as it enables teachers to adapt appropriate techniques and methods to error correction that suit the students' preferences (Wang, 2010, Hamouda, 2011).

5.4 Significant Relationships with Independent Variables

As mentioned in the Methodology section, for more rigorous results, a t-test was applied with gender as the independent variable and ANOVA was also applied with two other independent variables (language proficiency and students' major). No statistical significance was found between students with different language proficiency so only results in relation to the other independent variables mentioned above are presented in tables 4-7 below.

Table 4. Significant differences between Male and Female students

	Male		Female		P
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	
1. Take into consideration students' difficulties and concerns with the Foreign Language.	4.00	1.01	4.58	.57	.000
2. Be acquainted with the target culture.	3.88	.94	3.55	1.21	.018
3. Follow the textbook rigidly.	2.66	1.26	2.21	.96	.028

4. Grade written assignments predominantly for effort and content.	3.77	1.01	4.02	.89	.039
5. Set activities which expose students to the target culture.	3.44	1.29	3.31	1.04	.004

Results from the t-test with gender as the independent variable indicate that, generally, both genders rated most of the items in the same way with the exception of the five items listed in the table above where significant differences were found. Male students placed more importance on the teacher's acquaintance with the target culture ($p < .018$) and the use of it in the FL classroom ($p < .004$) than female students. Although following the textbook rigidly was rated really low by both genders, male students seem to show more tolerance regarding this item than their female counterparts. Statistically significant variations in the relative importance found on the first ($p < .000$) and fourth ($p < .039$) items in the table above indicate that female students place more emphasis than male students on the importance a teacher should give on effort and content when grading written assignments. The above results indicate that male students considered the teacher's good knowledge of the subject-matter more important than their female counterparts (Smith, Medendorp, Ranck, Morrison, & Kopfman, 1994) while the latter seemed to place great importance on the teacher's interpersonal characteristics which they may view as important in alleviating language anxiety in the classroom. Even though the fourth item is related to the teacher's approach to language teaching, it provides further evidence that for female students an effective EFL teacher should be understanding and take into consideration students' difficulties when grading written work. These results may stem from female learners' natural sensitivity, a finding also found in Shishavan (2010). According to Smith et al., (1994), female students have been reported to be more sensitive and tended to emphasise interpersonal characteristics in teachers more than male students.

Table 5. Significant differences between accounting students and students of other disciplines

Question	Variable 1	Mean/SD	Variable 2	F	Mean	SD	P
Simplify his language to facilitate comprehension.	Accounting F: 20	1.92 /1.20	Business	29	3.33	1.40	.038
			PE	43	4.34	.81	.000
			Maritime	18	4.23	.83	.000

As shown in table 7, *simplifying his language to facilitate comprehension* was rated much lower by those who were studying accounting than those studying Primary Education, Business studies and Maritime studies, suggesting that this characteristic was not considered important at all by the Accounting students. An initial assumption could be that Accounting is more practical, requiring an understanding of figures and charts contrary to the rest of the programmes of studies which are more theoretical. Such differences emphasise the different language needs among EFL students across different academic disciplines.

Table 6. Significant differences between students of different disciplines

Question	Primary Education			Business			P
	F	Mean	SD	F	Mean	SD	
1. Be eager to help students in and outside the classroom.	43	4.62	.48	29	4.00	.93	.045
2. Praise effort.	43	4.58	.66	29	3.75	.94	.009
3. Take into consideration students' difficulties and concerns with the FL.	43	4.77	.44	29	4.00	1.02	.017

Significant differences were also found in the responses given between Primary Education and Business Studies students regarding the three characteristics outlined in table 8 which relate to FL teacher's interpersonal characteristics. This is probably due to the fact that all the modules in the programme of teacher education are taught in Greek whereas the language of instruction in the Business studies is English. This means that the

former are in very few cases exposed to spoken or written English unlike their business counterparts, and therefore more likely to be in need of extra support and encouragement from their teacher. Another reason could be the actual content of their course of study which places great emphasis on the affective dimension of teaching; this may raise their awareness of the importance of such characteristics on the part of the teacher in creating more favourable conditions for learning.

6. Conclusions and Implications

This study investigated the effective characteristics of EFL teachers as perceived by Cypriot university students, which confirm to a certain extent those documented in the literature. Casting our minds back to the most prominent findings, effective language teaching seems to be related to a more learner-centred approach to language teaching and learning, which assumes a different role for the language teacher. According to the participants of this study, an effective language teacher is no longer considered one who has a directive and authoritarian role in the learning process but one who takes into consideration his/her students' individual differences, language anxiety, abilities and interests and design learning environments accordingly. Language teachers' skills in engaging students in meaningful classroom interactions and involving them in group tasks designed around real life topics and authentic language use have also been emphasised. Participants' views call for language teachers to move beyond the traditional focus-on-form approach to language teaching which views language learning as an individual activity, to the adoption of the communicative approach to language teaching which acknowledges the social aspect of learning and as such, it depends upon meaningful interactions with peers. The use of internet technology (YouTube), which was highly valued by a great number of participants, can also be seen as a feature of learner-centredness as its use requires more flexibility on the part of the teacher, allowing students greater autonomy and control over the teaching materials to be used.

EFL teachers working in tertiary education should use these findings as a yardstick to better understand themselves and the needs of their students for the enhancement of the learning process. Findings have important implications for the language teachers' knowledge and skills, and, consequently their initial preparation. Communication is a form of social interaction and as such it involves a high level of unpredictability and creativity, which cannot be achieved unless the teachers are communicatively competent themselves. The use of technology in the EFL classroom also requires teachers to have a high level of language proficiency as well as a certain level of technological literacy. Teacher education programmes should invest more on improving English language teachers' language competence, specifically focusing on their oral skills, which have proved to be of utmost importance in University settings as well as on developing their skills in using technology to support students' language learning. Additionally, if teachers are expected to use a more communicative, learner-centred approach and be more flexible with the teaching materials and topics to be used in the EFL classroom, it is also important for teacher educators and course designers to use a similar approach in preparing prospective teachers for this role.

Finally, the fact that significant differences were found between students depending on their gender and university majors provides evidence that there are different factors which may have an influence on students' individual needs and learning styles and consequently on their views of what characterises effective language teachers. Teachers should therefore be aware of the importance of student individuality and try to include in their lessons a variety of teaching methods, materials, topics and promote different learning strategies which would cater for the needs of all students in class. A questionnaire or an open class discussion where students are encouraged to express their views on different aspects of the EFL lesson could help the teachers understand what is expected of them and use this information to design more informed lessons.

Although the findings of this research concern directly the Cypriot situation and are limited because of scale, they can be used as a contribution to the development of more learner-centred teacher education curricula. As Brosh (1996) points out, the more we know about effective language teachers' characteristics, the more likely we are to develop language teacher preparation models which would be relevant to the professional needs of language teachers.

7. Limitations and Recommendations for Further Research

Despite the plethora of studies conducted on the characteristics of effective language teachers across different cultures and educational contexts, there are some gaps in the literature that warrant further research in the field. Most relevant research focuses on identifying differences in students' perceptions of effective language teachers according to their gender, major and language performance. Similarly, this study, due to space limitations, failed to consider important variables such as the background of students' parents (i.e. native speakers), prior language learning experiences including type of school they graduated from, therefore, the conclusions should be

interpreted with caution. We believe that in order to reach more informed conclusions, additional variables such as the ones mentioned above as well as students' personality traits and individual learning styles should also be investigated. More studies aiming to compare university students' perceptions from different cultural backgrounds would also provide further insights into the extent to which culture has an impact on the way students perceive effective language teachers at University level. Finally, it would be worth looking into the reasons which underpin university language students' perceptions as there may be a link between their prior language learning experiences and their conceptions of what constitutes effective language teaching.

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Appendix

Part I

Please circle the appropriate response.

General information

1. Gender

a) Male

b) Female

2. Your age is:

a) 18-20

b) 21-24

c) Over 24

3. Your major is:

a) Business

b) Primary Education

c) Accounting and Finance

d) Maritime studies

4. Your language proficiency is:

C (1/2) Proficient	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects.
B (1/2) Independent	Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue. Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise while travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, ambitions and plans.
A (1/2) Basic User	Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment).

Part II

Circle the number which best describes the degree of importance you attach to the items listed on the table which follow.

An effective English language teacher should:

	None	Little	Enough	Very	Very much
1. Be eager to help students in and outside the classroom.	1	2	3	4	5
2. Encourage students to express and discuss their needs for language learning	1	2	3	4	5
3. Praise effort	1	2	3	4	5
4. Be friendly to students	1	2	3	4	5
5. Treat students fairly regardless of achievement	1	2	3	4	5
6. Take into consideration student' difficulties with the foreign language	1	2	3	4	5
7. Express confidence in students' language abilities	1	2	3	4	5
8. Be open-minded	1	2	3	4	5
9. Use authority to maintain discipline.	1	2	3	4	5
10. Use English competently	1	2	3	4	5
11. Have a broad vocabulary in the FL	1	2	3	4	5
12. Have a native-like accent	1	2	3	4	5
13. Have a sound knowledge of the English grammar	1	2	3	4	5
14. Be familiar with language learning theories	1	2	3	4	5
15. Be acquainted with the target culture	1	2	3	4	5
16. Follow the textbook rigidly	1	2	3	4	5
17. Make frequent use of other material	1	2	3	4	5
18. Integrate computer-aided instruction into FL teaching.	1	2	3	4	5
19. Use English as the predominant means of classroom communication.	1	2	3	4	5
20. Provide opportunities for students to use English beyond the classroom setting.	1	2	3	4	5
21. Simplify his/her classroom language to facilitate comprehension of what is being said.	1	2	3	4	5
22. Not grade language production (speaking/writing) primarily for grammatical accuracy.	1	2	3	4	5
23. Use activities which draw learners' attention to specific grammatical features	1	2	3	4	5
24. Set activities which require students to interact with each other in English	1	2	3	4	5
25. Thoroughly explain new grammar rules before asking students to practice the relevant structure.	1	2	3	4	5
26. Grade written assignments predominantly for grammatical accuracy.	1	2	3	4	5
27. Grade written assignments predominantly for effort and content.	1	2	3	4	5
28. Set activities which require students to work in pairs or small groups.	1	2	3	4	5
29. Set activities which expose students to the target culture.	1	2	3	4	5
30. Correct students immediately after making a	1	2	3	4	5

grammar mistake during communicative activities

31. Use recasts (correct reformulations of students' speech) to correct students'	1	2	3	4	5
32. Address errors by immediately providing explanation as to why students' responses are incorrect.	1	2	3	4	5
33. Expose students to real life topics	1	2	3	4	5
34. Set activities which require students to work individually	1	2	3	4	5
35. Design or select material according to students' major	1	2	3	4	5

Part III

1. Is there anything you would like to add that was not mentioned in the questionnaire?

2. Would you be happy to follow up with an interview?

a) Yes

b) No

If yes, please provide the following details:

Name: _____ Surname: _____

E-mail address: _____

Contact phone No(s) : _____

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