

# What makes a good teacher? The perceptions of postgraduate TESOL students

BARBARA MULLOCK – The University of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia

## **ABSTRACT**

Shulman's (1987) conceptualisation of the knowledge base of teachers includes the categories of content knowledge, general pedagogic knowledge, curriculum knowledge, pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge of learners and their characteristics, knowledge of educational contexts, and knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values. While exploring some of these categories, many researchers have utilised the notion of 'expert teachers', who are often identified through reputation and/or through their students' superior performance on standardised tests. However, perceptions of what behaviours students believe characterise an expert TESOL teacher are under-represented in research. This study of 42 postgraduate TESOL students examines the views of novice and experienced teachers about what constitutes a good teacher. The study has implications for language teacher education, language teaching methodology and cross-cultural communication.

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## **Introduction**

Intuitively, TESOL students' assessment of the quality of their courses depends partly on the extent to which their teacher conforms to their conceptions of what a good teacher is. In this era, where a TESOL teacher's continuing employment may rest to some degree on student evaluations of courses (and implicitly, of teachers), there may be some benefit in understanding what it is that students value most in a teacher.

In the literature from general education, there are many studies detailing the development of expertise in teachers in Anglo cultures (for example, see the summary in Gage and Berliner 1998: 280–3).<sup>1</sup> In the area of TESOL, while mention is often made of what constitutes a good teacher, there are few data-driven studies of the subject (Cortazzi and Jin's 1996 study of TESOL in China is an exception). The current study attempts to address this gap.

## **Theoretical background**

### **GENERAL EDUCATION**

Studies of what constitutes an expert teacher in general education are often

motivated by the belief that if we know more about *what* teachers do well in classrooms and *how* they do these things, then we are in a better position to conduct initial professional education of teachers, in-service teacher development, teacher appraisal and curriculum reform. (Glaser 1987 in Berliner 1987; Westerman 1991). One of the best-known conceptualisations of what teachers know is that of Shulman (1987: 8) who defines teachers' knowledge as:

- content knowledge
- pedagogic content knowledge (the ability to contextualise, situate, and personalise the content for the learners)
- general pedagogic knowledge (principles and strategies of classroom management and organisation regardless of content matter)
- curriculum knowledge (materials and programs that are the 'tools of trade' for teachers)
- knowledge of learners and their characteristics
- knowledge of educational contexts, and contexts (the group, the classroom, the district, the community)
- knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values.

A further aim of this paper is to examine whether excellence in these categories corresponds to postgraduate TESOL students' perceptions of what makes a good TESOL teacher, and to identify which categories are regarded as the most important.

#### **THE IDENTIFICATION OF EXPERT TEACHERS**

In the majority of studies, expert teachers are identified by senior school and/or school district administrators in the first place. Then they are observed by researchers as they engage in the instructional sequence of planning, teaching and reflection. The most common criteria used in identification include their reputation (amongst peers and school administrators), their performance as observed in the classroom, and at primary level, consistent correlations with superior student performance in standardised tests (Berliner 1986; Shulman 1986; Westerman 1991; Livingstone and Borko 1989). Correlations with student performance in standardised tests is problematic for high schools, because of the absence of such tests (Shulman 1986). Another factor used in the identification of expert teachers is their experience. Westerman (1991), for example, takes five years experience as being the benchmark time by which expertise may develop.<sup>2</sup> Experience and good teaching may not always go hand in hand, however, though

experience is probably the most important prerequisite for the development of expertise (Gage and Berliner 1998).

A different method of identification is that of Brown and McIntyre (1989) and Batten, Marland and Khamis (1993), who asked primary and secondary students to nominate their most effective teachers and identify the qualities that made them such good teachers. Those identified as good teachers were observed teaching a unit of work, after which they were required to reflect on aspects of their teaching that they felt positive about.

### **THE FEATURES OF AN EXPERT TEACHER IN GENERAL EDUCATION**

Research from general education characterises the expert teacher as having superior cognition and knowledge structures (Ethel and McMeniman 2000). An expert teacher has:

- large, highly organised knowledge bases with complex interconnected schemas which are easily accessed
- sets of basic automated skills, or routines, which are executed smoothly and apparently effortlessly
- well-developed but flexible and adaptive sets of strategic knowledge which are used for planning.

Expert teachers work towards their pedagogical goals, evaluating and monitoring their actions. Their conceptual knowledge includes detailed knowledge of the subject matter, how it is to be taught, how to manage the classroom, and how to deal effectively with matters such as explaining a particular learning difficulty in ways that best suit students at particular stages of their learning (Biggs and Moore 1993). Their rich experiential knowledge allows them to draw on an extensive repertoire of strategies, routines and powerful schemata to improvise both in planning and in interactive teaching and to solve classroom problems as they arise. They know the relevance of the topic they are focusing on to other topics in the curriculum, and their streamlined procedures for managing the class allow them to allocate their attention to other relevant aspects of the teaching and learning process, such as student performance.

From the perspective of students, Brown and McIntyre (1989) and Batten et al (1993) found the two qualities with highest frequency of mention were the teacher's ability to 'explain clearly so that the [students] could understand', and 'help us with our work'. However, the ability to explain clearly appeared to be of peripheral importance to teachers – possibly because it is a deeply embedded and tacit aspect of teacher's craft knowledge. Another quality mentioned by students but not by teachers was being

fair. Students also placed a high value on helping and being friendly, leadership and organisation, and empathising and understanding. On the other hand, two qualities seen by teachers as crucial, but not mentioned by students, were planning, structuring and organising the classroom, and fostering student involvement and participation. However, in general there was close concordance in both Brown and McIntyre (1989) and Batten et al (1993) between the teachers' images of a good teacher and the students' perceptions of the interactional behaviour of teachers nominated by students as their best teachers (see Table 1).

**Table 1: Teacher and student views of what constitutes a good teacher**

Teacher views: A good teacher	Student views: A good teacher
–	explains clearly so that we can understand
helps, focuses on individual students	helps us with our work
develops positive teacher–student relationship	caring, relates to students
maintains student interest, enjoyment and keenness but also discipline and order	work is interesting and enjoyable but also controls the class well
promotes student achievement and progress	we learn a lot
–	is fair
plans, structures and organises the classroom	–
fosters student involvement and participation	–

Source: after Brown and McIntyre (1989); Batten, Marland and Khamis (1993)

### FINDINGS FROM TESOL AND LANGUAGE TEACHING

While a number of writers in TESOL have speculated on what characterises a good teacher, I am aware of only a few data-based studies in the field of TESOL. Cortazzi and Jin's (1996: 186–7) questionnaire study of 135 university students at two Chinese universities showed the percentage of respondents including the following qualities in their responses. The results are summarised in Table 2. Of interest is the extent to which these conceptions are similar across other Asian cultures.

Of writers who have speculated on the characteristics of a good TESOL teacher but have provided no data, Brown (2001) is fairly typical. He lists 30 features compiled from a number of unpublished sources. These include technical skills (knowing English and being able to use it), pedagogical skills, interpersonal skills, and personal qualities. Another typical list is provided by Harmer (1998), compiled from responses from English language learners

**Table 2: Chinese students' expectations of a good teacher (n = 135)**

knowledge of the subject matter	67.0%
is patient	25.0%
is humorous	23.7%
is a good moral example	21.5%
shows friendliness	21.5%
teaches students about life	17.5%
arouses students' interest	17.0%
is warmhearted and understanding	16.2%
uses effective teaching methods	16.2%
is caring and helpful	14.8%
explains clearly	6.7%

Source: Cortazzi and Jin (1996: 186–7)

studying in Britain (no further data available). He argues that a good teacher:

- makes lessons interesting
- loves their job
- shows their personality
- has lots of knowledge
- is an entertainer.

Harmer writes that the simplest answer to what makes a good teacher is that good teachers care more about their students' learning than they do about their own teaching.

In what follows I present the results of a study investigating views of a good language teacher to complement the findings on the characteristics which emerge from the general education literature. There is also a comparison with the findings of Cortazzi and Jin (1996), and with Shulman (1987).

## The current study

### SUBJECTS

The subjects were 42 postgraduate students of applied linguistics and TESOL (in Graduate Diploma or MA) at three universities in Sydney. Some were experienced teachers, but others had no teaching experience (see Table 3). The respondents came from a number of cultural and L1 backgrounds (see Table 4).

### METHODOLOGY

Interviews or questionnaires using a similar question format were employed. Students either completed an interview or the questionnaire and there was

**Table 3: Number of subjects in the study versus data collection method**

Years of experience/Number of teachers	0	1-2	2-3	3-4	5 +
Questionnaires (N = 17)	6	2	0	3	6
Interviews (N = 25)	6	2	5	1	11
Total (N = 42)	12	4	5	4	17

**Table 4: Subjects' countries of origin**

Countries of origin	Questionnaire (N = 17)	Interviews (N = 25)	Total (N = 42)
Australia	2	3	5
Britain	1	0	1
China	6	4	10
China/Hong Kong	2	2	4
Indonesia	–	6	6
Japan	2	1	3
Korea	2	4	6
Mongolia	1	0	1
Thailand	1	4	5
Vietnam	0	1	1

no duplication. In the interviews, subjects were asked to recall an excellent language teacher who had taught them, and to describe what qualities made this teacher so good. Then they were asked to generalise about the qualities of good English language teachers. The interview questions were typically phrased in the following way:

Interviewer: I'd like to start by asking you to remember the best teacher of English or another foreign language that you ever had and what sort of things made this teacher a good teacher. And then after that, I want to understand from your point of view and from your experience and your cultures and different education systems and your teaching situation, what is an expert teacher of English, what do you think makes a good teacher? What qualities or characteristics make a good teacher? (Transcript 8)

The interviews were conducted either individually or in groups with 25 students, and then transcribed. Interview respondents also completed a bio-data form.

A further 17 students completed a questionnaire which asked questions similar to those asked in the interview (see Appendix, p 22). The results from the interviews and questionnaires were combined to form a pool of 42 sets of data.

The data were analysed in the manner outlined in Lincoln and Guba (1985: 347–8). I read the transcribed interviews and questionnaires several times, and from these wrote each teacher quality that was mentioned by respondents onto an index card. On each card I also wrote the nationality of the respondent, number of years teaching experience, and whether the data came from an interview or a questionnaire. Next, the contents of each card were read and mentally noted. Then the cards were sorted into categories according to whether, on an intuitive basis, they were similar or different ('look alike feel alike'). If they were different, the card was set aside to form another category. Each card was subjected to this process. I repeated the categorisation process three times to improve reliability. Then the comments were given a descriptive label. Finally, the frequency of comments in each category was calculated. In the sorting process, categories from previous studies were not used consciously. Instead, I tried to let the categories emerge from the data. In cases where there were two possible categories in which a quality could be placed, I returned to the transcript or questionnaire to seek the complete context of the remark, and made a decision based on the context.

This categorisation process was repeated twice. The first categorisation was to enable comparison with the findings reported in Cortazzi and Jin (1996). The entire set of cards was then re-sorted, to enable me to make comparisons with Shulman (1987). For the first sorting, descriptive labels were derived from a response that summarised the category. For the second sorting, the descriptive labels were chosen to summarise the categories. To further assist with reliability and validity, copies of the findings, in the form of an early draft of the current paper, were forwarded to respondents for comment.

## Findings

Not all respondents reported having had an excellent language teacher in their past experience, but all were able to list what qualities made a language teacher good. The frequency of participants' comments is presented in Table 5, and these results are compared with the findings of Cortazzi and Jin (1996).

The most frequently occurring category mentioned by participants was that a good teacher knows and understand students' needs and expectations, strengths and weaknesses. This seems to echo Clark and Peterson's (1986) finding that, while they are teaching, good teachers focus their thoughts most upon their pupils (see also Harmer 1998). Brown and McIntyre (1989) also reported that the most obvious common feature mentioned by expert teachers in response to questions about their teaching was that they almost always talked about what their students were doing. However, only 16.2 per cent of Cortazzi and Jin's (1996) respondents rated this category as important, compared to 55 per cent in the current study.

**Table 5: Most frequently mentioned characteristics of a good TESOL teacher**

	<b>Total number of respondents (%)</b>	<b>Cortazzi and Jin (1996) (%)</b>
1 Knows and understands students' needs and strengths and weaknesses	23 (55)	(16.2)
2 Knows the subject matter	20 (48)	(67.0)
3 Skilled in teaching techniques and methods	17 (40)	(16.2)
4 Treats students with courtesy and respect, shows empathy towards the students	17 (40)	
5 Keeps up-to-date in knowledge and skills	15 (38)	
6 Can pass on knowledge to students	15 (38)	
7 Can motivate students (for example, interesting topics and activities)	14 (33)	(17.0)
8 Well prepared/well organised	14 (33)	
9 Sense of humour	12 (29)	(23.7)
10 Enthusiastic about teaching	11 (26)	
11 NS (native speaker) or near NS proficiency	10 (24)	
12 Very caring/kind to students	9 (21)	(14.8)
13 Active in the classroom	8 (19)	
14 Inspires students	8 (19)	
15 Patient	7 (17)	(25.0)
16 Has sense of responsibility, provides professional leadership	7 (17)	
17 Helps students get good exam marks	6 (14)	
18 Provides a good moral example	6 (14)	(21.5)
19 Cross-cultural knowledge and skills	6 (14)	
20 Encourages students	6 (14)	
21 Helps students form a good personality	5 (12)	

The second most frequently mentioned quality in the data was knowledge of the subject matter. This echoes the findings of research in general education (Ethell and McMeniman 2000). Subject matter knowledge is important



because it becomes the framework for constructing other forms of declarative and procedural knowledge that are important for teaching (Biggs and Moore 1993). For the respondents, this category appeared to include knowledge of the language and how it works (that is, lexico-grammar, phonology, semantics et cetera). The ability to use the language (communicative competence) was given separately by 24 per cent of respondents. This relatively high frequency of response reflects the fact that 88 per cent of the respondents were non-native speakers of English.

The third most frequently given quality, that good teachers are skilled in teaching techniques and methods, also echoes the findings reported in the general education literature. Clark and Peterson (1986) found that the second most important focus for teachers during the act of teaching is the 'procedures', moves' or 'tactics' they are going to use. This also appears to be related to the sixth, seventh and eighth ranked qualities in Table 5: the ability to make complex material easy for students to understand, to make lessons interesting and motivating, and being well prepared and well organised.

The fourth-ranked quality, keeping up-to-date with the language and language teaching methodology, would seem to reflect the sample group: experienced and novice teachers undertaking an applied linguistics course in a non English speaking country. Teachers undertaking such a course are likely do so *because* they wish to be up-to-date.

Interestingly, 29 per cent of the respondents in the current study were novice teachers, and yet there was only one area where their responses were significantly different from those of experienced teachers: only three out of twelve novice teachers noted that an expert teacher is well organised and plans thoroughly – a *sine qua non* for experienced teachers.

It is interesting to note that the current study does not support the findings of Cortazzi and Jin (1996). Table 5 shows the most frequently mentioned category in Cortazzi and Jin's study was knowledge of the subject matter (67 per cent). Knowledge of the subject matter was also considered important in the current study, but was second to 'knows and understands students' needs, strengths and weaknesses'. Cortazzi and Jin (1996: 187) claim that 'overwhelmingly' the most common expectation that Chinese students have of a good teacher is that she/he have a 'deep knowledge' of the subject matter, and that this is in keeping with the traditional Chinese notion that the central aim in teaching is to provide knowledge for the students. In TESOL this translates to an emphasis in the Chinese classroom on grammar and vocabulary, whereas Western notions of the central aim in language teaching revolve more around communication skills and language use (Cortazzi and Jin 1996: 199). Another difference in the results of my study and those

reported in Cortazzi and Jin (1996) was that, while the second most frequently mentioned category in their study was 'is patient' (25 per cent), this was ranked 15th in the current study. A further difference was that the third most frequently mentioned category in the current study was skill in teaching techniques and methods (40 per cent), whereas the comparable category in Cortazzi and Jin's study attracted only 16.2 per cent of responses and was ranked ninth. A possible reason for these differences is that the respondents in the current study were teachers or intending teachers attending a teacher development course and were thus more sensitive to, and informed about, the teaching-learning process, and more communicative approaches, whereas those in Cortazzi and Jin's study were undergraduate students. Another possible reason may be that the respondents in Cortazzi and Jin's study came only from China, whereas those in the current study came from a number of different cultural backgrounds (though 10 or 24 per cent were from China) with different cultures of education. This reason seems plausible.<sup>3</sup>

As noted above, after making comparisons with the findings of Cortazzi and Jin, the data from the questionnaires and interviews were re-analysed and sorted into more general categories, again using the method described by Lincoln and Guba (1985: 347–8). The categories were given the following descriptive labels, and examples from the data are included:

- Pedagogical content knowledge and skills – the term is borrowed from Shulman (1987) – refers to the distinctive kind of knowledge which teachers need in order to transform content knowledge to make it interesting and comprehensible to those they are teaching (for example, can motivate students by using interesting topics and activities, can pass on knowledge to students, gives accurate and helpful feedback, gives students confidence to take risks).
- Attitudes and behaviour towards students (for example, takes a personal interest in each student, knows each student's strengths and weaknesses, knows and understands students' needs and expectations). In the words of one student, this refers to 'developing a personal and working relationship with students to maximise student learning, showing empathy'.
- Teachers' personal characteristics and attitudes (for example, has a sense of humour, has a sense of responsibility, enthusiastic about teaching, generous and shares ideas, open-minded).
- Content knowledge (for example, knows the subject matter, NS or near NS proficiency, knows target language cultural background).
- Broader educational goals and skills (for example, helps students form a

good personality, provides a good moral example, opens students' eyes to the outside world, stretches and challenges students, doesn't emphasise exam results).

These labels are, of course, second-order labels, in that they reflect the researcher's way of representing the respondents' perceptions. They are not the respondent's labels, nor, with the exception of 'pedagogical content knowledge and skills', were they consciously taken from previous studies. Table 6 shows the categories ranked according to the highest frequency of mention.

**Table 6: Ranking of frequency of responses according to category**

	Number of responses
Pedagogical content knowledge and skills	96 (32%)
Attitudes and behaviour towards students	84 (28%)
Teachers' personal characteristics and attitudes	67 (22%)
Content knowledge	30 (10%)
Broader educational goals and skills	28 (9%)
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>304</b>

The first-ranked category of pedagogical content knowledge and skills accords with the findings from studies in general education. Respondents answered in terms of using methods which are interesting and motivating, creating a good class atmosphere, having flexible and diverse teaching methods, being able to pass knowledge on to students, and being very organised. Findings from studies in general education characterise pedagogical content knowledge as the ability to contextualise, situate, and personalise the content for the learners. A good teacher knows what aspects of a subject are difficult or easy for students, and has a store of powerful explanations, illustrations, demonstrations, and examples for representing the subject matter to the students, which can be provided at speed. This relates to knowledge of the students, of what they know, what their needs and interests are, and how to connect the new content with what they know already (Berliner 1986; Livingstone and Borko 1989).

Another aspect of this category is that good teachers have well-developed, automatised strategies for planning, and teaching their lessons in effective and creative ways. These skills allow them to execute basic routines smoothly and efficiently. They are opportunistic planners who are able to change tack quickly if the classroom situation dictates it. This ability to 'think on your feet' was specifically mentioned by three respondents in the current study. Expert teachers are able to generate contingency plans for situations that are

likely to be encountered, a quality not shared by novices (Peterson and Clark 1978; Berliner 1986; Westerman 1991).

Interestingly, two respondents from China mentioned one of their preferred ways of motivating students was giving them good marks. Another interesting response by six subjects (four from Korea and one each from China and Thailand) was a good teacher is one who 'helps students get good results in exams', a highly pragmatic view, which respondents claimed was tied to the educational context, where high marks in English are essential for university entrance. This feature will be raised again below.

A controversial criterion was whether a good teacher should admit lack of knowledge about some aspect of the language (for example, grammar point) and then report the answer at a later date (which is what the Australian teachers favoured), or whether a good teacher could answer correctly every single question asked by the students. Some respondents (two from China, one from Korea and one from Japan) favoured the latter, saying to admit lack of knowledge threatened one's credibility. However, Littlewood (2000) has shown that this attitude, supposedly a characteristic of Confucian heritage countries, is not as widespread as is often thought.

The second-ranked quality was having positive relationships with students, and the majority of comments revolved around the teacher taking a personal interest in each student, knowing their strengths and weaknesses, interests, needs and expectations, and being empathetic towards them. Good teachers were seen as being sympathetic, encouraging students and treating them with courtesy and respect, and possessing cross-cultural knowledge and skills. The importance of creating and maintaining good teacher-learner relationships echoes findings in the general education literature, such as those by Brown and McIntyre (1989) and Batten et al (1993), and appears to be important across different L1 backgrounds.

Studies in general education indicate that expert teachers are characterised as possessing a large quantity of complex, tacit knowledge about the students. They possess an image of the types of behaviours and discipline problems that they might face, as well as what students might possess with respect to background knowledge, experience and skills (Berliner 1986). In the case of respondents in this study, cross-cultural knowledge and skills were also considered important. This complex knowledge allows expert teachers to decide how to present subject matter, and how to organise and manage a class. They are able to think about the learning task from the perspective of the student (Westerman 1991), or, as Shulman (1987: 14) puts it, they can think their way from the subject matter into the minds and motivations of the learner. They know the student conceptions, misconceptions, expectations,

motives, difficulties, or strategies which may influence the ways they approach, interpret, understand or misunderstand the materials.

However, it is not only knowledge of the learners that is important: the teacher's relationship with the students is also crucial. Batten et al (1993) and Brown and McIntyre (1989) both comment that good rapport and mutual trust between students and their teacher was one of three major ingredients of a successful lesson. An interesting finding was that when reflecting on their best language teacher, a number of respondents made comments like 'she was never negative', 'he took a personal interest in me', 'very caring' and 'she just encouraged me'.

The third-ranked category was teachers' personal characteristics and attitudes. This differs from the previous category in that the characteristics were more general in nature and/or were not expressed in terms of relationships with the students. Such personal qualities, such as having a sense of humour, or being generous, or being patient, are qualities that can be observed both within and outside the teaching context. Attitudes mentioned by respondents, such as having enthusiasm for the subject, and 'loving teaching', and keeping up to date in knowledge and skills, relate to a state of mind rather than to knowledge of, and/or direct relationships with, students. Both Brown and McIntyre (1989) and Batten et al (1993) noted the frequency with which students mentioned humour as an important quality in teachers. In the current study, respondents noted qualities such as being passionate about the subject, and being enthusiastic about teaching, which seem to accord with Berliner's (1988 quoted in Brown and McIntyre 1989) finding that emotion invested in the teaching is an important mark of an expert teacher.

Other important qualities in this category given by respondents included keeping up to date with the language and with teaching techniques, and having a sense of responsibility, particularly in solving teaching and learning problems. An interesting finding was that four respondents (from Vietnam and Indonesia) mentioned the importance of the teacher being well dressed. This seems to indicate that, for some Asian students at least, dress is possibly more important than it is in the West.

The fourth category, content knowledge, encompassed only two criteria: 'knows the subject matter' and 'has NS or near NS proficiency'. Having good language proficiency reflects the fact that 37 or 88 per cent of the respondents were non-native speakers, and had learned English from other non-native speakers.

This accords with findings from studies in general education, that expert teachers' knowledge of subject matter is elaborate, complex, interconnected and easily accessible. Their store of facts, principles and experience is large

and well integrated, and can be easily drawn on for planning, interactive teaching, and reflection. Not only do they understand that something is so but they also understand why it is so (Livingstone and Borko 1989).

The fifth and final category was that of broader educational goals and skills. This included 'stretching and challenging students intellectually', and 'opening their eyes to the outside world'. It also included telling students why it was important to learn English. This category related to issues outside the mere learning of language forms and functions. The most frequently mentioned quality was 'inspiring students', and the reason for placing this quality in the broader educational goals and skills category is shown in this excerpt:

without meaning to be too cynical, I think a lot of our students who come here for nine months they're being sort of shipped off by their parents to learn some social skills because they're a little bit directionless. Erm so we get a lot of students who sit there and and have er 'here we are now entertain us' sort of (laugh) thing about them, at the risk of quoting Nirvana. Yeah um ... I think going back to your roles to some degree erm with an unmotivated student erm if you can be erm a motivating and inspiring role model within your language then they will want to be like you a bit and they will want to speak your language and say the things that you say. (Transcript 7)

The two (equal) second most frequently mentioned qualities in this category were helping students form a good personality and providing a good moral example. These were mentioned only by Asian respondents: Chinese, Indonesian, Thai, Vietnamese and Japanese. The context in which they were mentioned appeared to relate more to secondary tertiary education. This conception of TESOL teachers as helping students to form a good personality may not reflect current pluralistic Western views of what a teacher should do, particularly with classes of adults or young adults, but perhaps providing moral guidance to younger students is something that as a profession we should consider more.

Three native speaker respondents (out of five) considered that a good teacher stretched and challenged students intellectually. Interestingly, this category of broader educational goals and skills was one where only three responses (out of twenty-eight) came from students without teaching experience.

The category of broader educational goals and skills is not always explicitly mentioned by researchers in general education. The closest Brown and McIntyre (1993: 62) get to this category is in relation to the goal of promoting specific kinds of progress. This notion of 'progress' included the development of pupils' knowledge, understanding and skills, but also the development of affective growth, in confidence and poise. In terms of Shulman's (1987) framework, it could be argued that this category corresponds to knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values, particularly the latter.

## Discussion

A particularly interesting and poignant perspective came from one respondent who reflected on her secondary schooling in Korea and distinguished two types of good teachers. One type, whom she called the 'expert' teacher, was good at tipping questions in the university entrance examinations, and taught good learning strategies for passing the examinations. The other type of teacher, whom she called the 'good' teacher, had good technical skills but placed less emphasis on pressurising students and preparing them for the exams, and more on trying to understand them and establish good relations with them. The good teacher was courteous, and respected students. This was important to the respondent because, in her words, secondary students felt a 'lack of love [and] affection from teachers, which they really need'. Further, good teachers taught them about life. She reported that there were few such teachers, but students 'longed for' them.

This response suggests that for some subjects in this study there may be two different ways in which a 'good teacher' is conceptualised: teachers who get good exam results (and who are highly sought after because they assist learners enter university and the like), and teachers who meet learners' wider interpersonal, social and affective needs, who may act in a major life-changing way (the nurturing, supportive teachers). The former, I shall term the 'pragmatic' teacher, and the latter the 'empathetic' teacher.<sup>4</sup> Table 7 is a tentative attempt to show the categories from Table 5 rearranged according to the qualities of these two types of teacher. Biggs and Moore (1993: 488) note that, in general education, the importance of interpersonal skills is not always the focus of researchers, and that expert teachers tend to be characterised according to superior conceptual knowledge: good content and procedural knowledge and high student achievement, rather than interpersonal and affective qualities.

It would seem that the truly expert teacher is a combination of the two. This view is supported by Brekelmans, Wubbels and Creton (1990 in Batten et al 1993), who found that teachers who strongly displayed excellent interactional and affective qualities also obtained relatively high cognitive and affective student outcomes compared to teachers who were perceived by students to possess these qualities to a limited extent.

Returning now to Shulman's (1987) knowledge base of teachers, the current data broadly reflect Shulman's categories (see Table 8), but perhaps not surprisingly also highlight the categories of teacher attitudes and skills. There was little in the data to differentiate between Shulman's categories of general pedagogical knowledge, and pedagogical content knowledge. Further, the category 'teachers' personal characteristics and attitudes' has no

**Table 7: Tentative distinctions between the ‘pragmatic’ teacher and the ‘empathetic’ teacher**

<b>The ‘pragmatic’ teacher</b>	<b>The ‘empathetic’ teacher</b>
# Knows the subject matter	# Knows the subject matter
	Knows and understand students’ needs and strengths and weaknesses
# Skilled in teaching techniques and methods	# Skilled in teaching techniques and methods
Well prepared/well organised	Treats students with courtesy and respect, shows empathy towards the students
# Keeps up-to-date in knowledge and skills	# Keeps up-to-date in knowledge and skills
# Can pass on knowledge to students	# Can pass on knowledge to students
# NS or near NS proficiency	# NS or near NS proficiency
	Can motivate students (for example, interesting topics and activities)
Helps students get good exam marks	Sense of humour
? Enthusiastic about teaching	Enthusiastic about teaching
? Active in the classroom	Active in the classroom
	Very caring/kind to students
	Inspires students
	Patient
	? Has sense of responsibility, provides professional leadership
	? Provides a good moral example
	? Cross-cultural knowledge and skills
	Encourages students
	Helps students form a good personality

# Indicates probably applies to both types of teacher

? Indicates may apply to this type of teacher only

direct counterpart in the categories identified by Shulman (1987), who was more concerned with teachers’ knowledge, rather than with their attitudes and personal characteristics.

Some categories mentioned by Shulman (1987) but not reflected explicitly in the data include knowledge of educational contexts, and curriculum knowledge. It could be argued that Shulman’s ‘knowledge of educational contexts’ is subsumed in the category ‘broader educational goals and skills’



**Table 8: Comparison of Shulman's categories with those of the current study**

<b>Shulman's categories</b>	<b>Categories from the current study</b>
Content knowledge	Content knowledge
Pedagogic content knowledge	Pedagogical content knowledge and skills
General pedagogic knowledge	Pedagogical content knowledge and skills
Curriculum knowledge	? Content knowledge
Knowledge of learners and their characteristics	Attitudes and behaviour towards students
Knowledge of educational contexts, and contexts	? Broader educational goals and skills
Knowledge of educational ends, purposes and values	? Broader educational goals and skills
? Teachers' personal characteristics and attitudes	

? Indicates may be included in this category

(in responses such as 'provides professional leadership', 'helps students get good exam marks', and 'collaborates with others to support student learning'). It is interesting that none of the respondents specifically mentioned curriculum knowledge. It is not immediately clear why this is so. Perhaps respondents included this category in the category of subject matter knowledge (knows the subject matter, knows target language cultural background). Another reason may be that Shulman's category relates more to general education, where knowledge and skills are more clearly defined for different year or grade levels, and perhaps subject to an examination or assessment process.

However, research in general education shows good teachers know the range of instructional programs and materials for various levels, and knowledge of curriculum, together with the knowledge of the subject matter and the students, allows teachers to plan lessons and also have a clear image of how the lesson will go. Novice students rarely have a clear idea of how a lesson will go (Westerman 1991).

A further finding from the interviews was the strong sense that these qualities of a good teacher are not cast in stone, and that perceptions of what constitutes an expert teacher have changed over the years. For example, one correspondent from China based her responses on teaching she had experienced more than 25 years ago, and said that at that time beautiful handwriting on the blackboard was a mark of a good teacher, as was being very strict in the classroom. But responses from other Chinese respondents did not support this view.

In another example, a respondent commented that when she was in junior high school in Japan, proficiency in English was not a high priority:

It doesn't matter whether the teacher's pronunciation is good or not, we just never know, they are teachers so we have to respect them. (Transcript 8)

What was more important was the ability to give students knowledge about the language (not the ability to use the language), the ability to explain grammar points in Japanese and translate reading passages. Speaking, listening and writing skills were not required. Nowadays, the respondent indicated, Japanese students were more critical and less accepting of teachers whose language skills were poor. Respondents from China also indicated some loss of respect for the power and authority of the teacher.

The findings of this research, particularly the importance of having positive relationships with students, may confirm hunches that many of us have had, and in this there are implications for methodology and teacher education. Anecdotally, many cooperating teachers rate rapport with students as a major factor in their evaluation of novice teacher effectiveness. This would seem to be vindicated by the current study. For practising teachers, a related implication is the importance of being aware of individual student needs and maintaining good interactional relationships. The findings also point to the need for constant improvement and refinement of subject matter knowledge, and thus for continuing professional development. For NNES (non-native English speaking) teachers, this includes knowledge of the language, especially the spoken language, and knowledge of current usage and idioms. For NES (native English speaking teachers), it includes knowledge of how the language works, at all levels, and the ability to explain this. A further implication relates to promoting reflection on these areas at pre-service and in-service levels.

## Conclusion

Respondents in this study nominated qualities characterising an expert TESOL teacher which are similar to those characterising expert teachers in general education, and there was broad support for Shulman (1987). Respondents in the study reported that good TESOL teachers know the language, and how it works. They know what to teach, and how to keep students engaged in the instructional process. They are friendly, easy to get on with, understand their students and are interested in them, and in helping them solve their learning problems, but they teach students about issues that are wider than just language. These qualities seemed most important to the respondents in this study. In addition, good teachers keep up-to-date in their knowledge and skills, and they have the personal qualities of being humorous and patient, and enthusiastic about their work. This is not to imply, of course,

that all of these qualities are found in each teacher characterised as good. However, it is possible that in any mixed L1 background class a number of these teacher qualities will be valued.

Less evident in this study, but present in research in general education, are issues concerned with discipline and control. This would appear to be partly because the majority of the respondents were teachers of adults, rather than primary or secondary students.

The study does not support any extension to other Asian contexts of the findings of Cortazzi and Jin (1996) that knowing the subject matter is the most important quality of a good teacher. Knowledge and understanding of student needs, strengths and weaknesses were considered the most important quality of a good teacher, followed by knowledge of subject matter. The third most important quality cited by participants in this study was skill in teaching techniques, which Cortazzi and Jin's respondents ranked only ninth. On the other hand, the small number of respondents from different language and cultural backgrounds does not allow us to draw any conclusions about the extent to which conceptions of what qualities make a good teacher are similar across cultures. That is an area for further research.

A final, and obvious, comment is the need for further studies to correlate perceptions about good teachers with teacher behaviours in the classroom context, and with larger numbers of subjects of different language and educational backgrounds.

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#### **NOTES**

- 1 In many texts, the terms expert teacher, great teacher, effective teacher, and good teacher are used interchangeably.
- 2 I am not aware that this benchmark is generally applied to TESOL teachers.
- 3 It is interesting to note that there were few obvious differences between the different nationality groups, though the small numbers in the study do not allow generalisation.
- 4 I am indebted to an anonymous reviewer for these terms.

## Appendix

### Questionnaire

- 1 What is your first language? \_\_\_\_\_
- 2 In which country(s) did you receive your  
primary school education? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
secondary school education? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
post-secondary education? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
- 3 Are you an experienced teacher of English/TESOL/ESL/EFL?  
(CIRCLE ONE)            YES    NO
- 4 If YES,
  - a) how many years of teaching experience do you have? \_\_\_\_\_ years
  - b) In what context do/did you teach English?  
(CIRCLE ONE)            Primary    Secondary    Post-secondary
  - c) In what type of institution do/did you work?  
(CIRCLE ONE)            Government institution    Non-Government institution
- 5 In your previous study, have you had one particular teacher whom you would consider to be an excellent teacher of English or another foreign language?  
(CIRCLE ONE)            YES    NO
- 6 If YES, what characteristics/behaviours made this teacher so good?  
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