

The impact of quality teaching on student achievement

Brikena Xhaferi*, Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications, South East European University, 1200 Tetovo, Macedonia.

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Abstract

Institutions seek out the best teachers, because quality teaching is an important factor in student achievement. It is related to the knowledge, beliefs, attitudes and dispositions that teachers bring into their profession. The South East European University strives for the highest quality in every faculty and department and sees quality improvement as an individual and collective responsibility. The university supports effective staff performance through announced and unannounced observations, student and staff evaluations, and internal and external opportunities for professional development and training. This study explores teacher and student perspectives on issues related to the teacher's effectiveness, role and impact on student achievement. Language teachers are found to encourage interaction in the classroom, have a positive attitude towards changes and are open to new teaching situations. Based on the observations, quality teaching depends on knowledge of subject matter and teaching skills—factors that have a positive impact on students' academic achievement.

Keywords: SEEU, quality teaching, teacher qualities, student achievement.

* ADDRESS FOR CORRESPONDENCE: **Brikena Xhaferi**, Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications, South East European University, 1200 Tetovo, Macedonia. E-mail address: b.xhaferi@seeu.edu.mk

1. Introduction

Quality teaching is a core issue in higher education, which directly influences the economic and cultural development of any country. ‘Responding to diversity and growing expectations for higher education requires a fundamental shift in its provision; it requires a more student-centred approach to learning and teaching, embracing flexible learning paths and recognizing competences gained outside formal curricula’ (ESG, 2015). It is further stated that one of the main roles of quality assurance is to respond to this diversity by all means and to assure that students achieve the desired competencies and qualifications. The definition of ‘quality assurance’ is used to describe all activities within the continuous improvement cycle (i.e., assurance and enhancement activities) (ESG, 2015).

On the other hand, some works define ‘quality teaching’ indirectly, either through its impact on student outcomes, or through the presence of professional attributes, including skills, knowledge, qualifications and professional learning, though, i.e., teachers’ quality is a key to learners’ success. ‘In achieving the goals of quality education for all (EFA) there is a great need to develop a broadened vision of educational goals ... and to build national capacity in developing key competencies required of all learners through curriculum renewal in emerging knowledge-based societies of the 21st century’ (UNESCO 2005). The main qualities of a good teacher are the knowledge of subject area, teaching experience, teacher training and credentials and overall academic ability.

Another notion about quality teaching from a cognitive resource perspective assumes that teachers’ knowledge, skills and dispositions are central predictors for quality teaching (Ball *et al.* 2008, Pajares 1992, Shulman 1987 cited in Wang, Lin, Spalding, Klecka & Odell, 2011) and enhancing teachers’ skills and knowledge should be one of the main goals of every institution. In the USA, for example, there is a programme called *No Child Left Behind*. This is a law passed by the USA Congress in 2001, and it aims at a special focus on ensuring that states and schools boost the performance of certain groups of students, such as English-language learners, students in special education, and poor and minority children, whose achievement, on average, trails their peers.

There are many studies conducted on this issue; Darling-Hammond (2000) came to the conclusion that the variables related to teachers’ competence include academic ability and years of education. Similar results are shown from the study conducted in Dallas, which conclude that teachers are an influential factor of student achievement, regardless of socioeconomic status and even school location. Without any doubt, one of the most influential studies in this field is the one done in Goe and Stickler (2008). Goe and Stickler (2008) strongly believe that ‘Teacher characteristics are often included in descriptions of teacher quality but are less often measured in conjunction with student learning outcomes’. He examined four categories of a quality teacher – teacher qualification, characteristics, practices and teaching effectiveness. As it can be seen from Table 1, the first category of teacher characteristics includes: credentials, knowledge and experiences that teachers bring with them when they enter the classroom, such as coursework, grades, subject-matter education, degrees, test scores, experience, certification(s) and evidence of participation in continued learning (e.g., internships, induction, supplemental training and professional development).

Table 1. Four lenses for examining teacher quality (taken from Goe & Stickler, 2008)

Category	Definition and example indicators
Teacher qualifications	Credentials, knowledge, and experiences that teachers bring with them when they enter the classroom, such as coursework, grades, subject-matter education, degrees, test scores, experience, certification(s), and evidence of participation in continued learning (e.g., internships, induction, supplemental training and professional development)
Teacher characteristics	Attitudes and attributes that teachers bring with them when they enter the classroom such as expectations for students, collegiality or a collaborative nature, race, and gender
Teacher practices	Classroom practices teachers employ – that is, the ways in which teachers interact with students

	and the teaching strategies they use to accomplish specific teaching tasks, such as aligning instruction with assessment, communicating clear learning objectives and expectations for student performance, providing intellectual challenge, allowing students to explain what they are learning, using formative assessment to understand what and the degree to which students are actually learning, offering active learning experiences, subscribing to cohesive sets of the best teaching practices
Teacher effectiveness	A 'value-added' assessment of the degree to which teachers who are already in the classroom contribute to their students' learning, as indicated by higher-than-predicted increases in student achievement scores

Additionally, some studies suggest that 'teachers' who have had pedagogical training and who have received certification produce better student achievement scores than those who have not, although some studies dispute this finding and they suggest that there should be an optimal balance between content and pedagogical knowledge (Goldhaber & Brewer 2000 cited in The Center for Public Education, 2005). Generally, teachers know that a very important perspective is what teachers really do in practice.

1.1. Quality Assurance at South East European University

The enhancement of quality in teaching and also its maintenance are becoming major issues in higher education in many countries. According to Fraser (1991) 'quality has four components; everyonehas a responsibility for maintaining the quality of the product; everyone...has a responsibility for enhancing the quality of the product; everyone...feels ownership ...of enhancing quality and management regularly checks the quality'. The universities themselves use different tools to maintain quality in education. Self-evaluation is one of the activities which can be undertaken. Fraser (1991) believes that external evaluations can serve as a 'mirror' but also training staff for the task of self-evaluation is crucial in this process. The quality assurance at SEEU is organised very well, which targets effective developments. 'University focuses on Quality issues in its Strategic Plan and has a Quality Policy which underpins a functioning quality structure, with clearly defined roles and evaluative activities. The evaluation of achievements and the implementation of key priorities for improvement and measurement are carried out through Faculty and Departmental Action Plans, validated and monitored by senior managers'. Three main instruments used are the Student Evaluation Survey, Staff Evaluation Process and Staff Development Procedure.

One of the main tools to improve teaching and learning is *classroom observation*. Classroom observation is shown to be very effective on improving teacher practice in the classroom. As Schoenfeld (2013) puts forth, 'Capturing the dimensions of teaching in a manageable observation scheme is tremendously challenging, and readers rarely get to see the twists and turns of plausible but unworkable ideas that precede the presentation of the dean final product. I hope that revealing some of those pathways in this case will prove to be useful' (p. 2). Montgomer (2002) strongly believes that 'classroom observation appraisal has been considered to take three main forms (the first one for professional development, the second one for reward, and the third one for promotion), researchers and practitioners generally agree that the most effective use of classroom observation is for professional development' (as cited in Lasagabaster & Sierra, 2011).

2. Research Methodology

2.1. Research Questions

The study aims to explore teacher and student perspectives on the main issues related to teaching effectiveness; it identifies the main characteristics of a good teacher and its impact on student achievement. The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What are teachers' opinions about effective teaching?
2. What are the characteristics of a good teacher?
3. How does good teaching influence student achievement?

2.2. Research Participants

The research context is the South East European University in Tetovo. There were 68 participants, students of the faculty of languages, cultures and communications. They all belonged to different nationalities: Albanians, Macedonians and Turks. Their ages ranged from 18 to 23 years. They all study English, German and Albanian and take an intensive course of the Macedonian language. There were also 12 teachers involved in the study. The teachers had different educational backgrounds and also different teaching experiences, but they all hold either PhD or MA degrees. All the teachers teach at the Faculty of Languages, Cultures and Communications at SEEU, in Albania. The participants of the study were advised about the purpose of the research before it started.

2.3. Research Instruments

For the purpose of gathering information from respondents, the study used three instruments: a student questionnaire, a teacher questionnaire and student reflections (Appendices 1 and 2). The student questionnaire aimed to find out student opinions about the main characteristics of a good teacher and it contains 20 questions. The teacher questionnaire, on the other hand, investigates teacher attitudes towards good teaching practices and methods of teaching effectiveness. It contains two parts, A and B. Finally, student reflections offered students a chance to reflect repeatedly on their learning and effective teaching activities used by their teachers.

3. Results

3.1. Student Questionnaire Results

The aim of the questionnaire was to investigate students' opinions about teacher qualities. The results are presented in Table 1. All questionnaire items are related to characteristics of an effective teacher. Number 1 for being the least important and number 5 for being the most important tissue in teaching.

Items	1	2	3	4	5
An effective teacher...					
1. Demonstrates excellent knowledge in their subject field					
2. Does research in their subject area					
3. Relates their research directly to module sessions					
4. Relates theory to work-based practice					
5. Encourages discussion in the classroom					
6. Motivates students to study more					
7. Enables students to understand the content of each lesson					
8. Is patient with their students					
9. Is prepared to explain all points presented					

10. Respects students' opinions
11. Is approachable
12. Is enthusiastic about teaching
13. Gives clear guidance when asked for help
14. Starts sessions on time
15. Includes group activities
16. Summarises the main information in the end
17. Gives and accepts examples from their and students' experiences
18. Recognises learner differences
19. Provides feedback
20. Allows time for tasks

Figure 1. Student questionnaire

In response to item 1 'An effective teacher demonstrates excellent knowledge in their subject field', a majority of the respondents (90%) strongly agreed by ticking 5, which should be the case; on the other hand, 45% of the participants strongly agreed that they should 'do research in the subject area'. Again, 40% of the participants strongly agreed that teachers 'should relate their research directly to module sessions'. This fact shows that research is not relevant for quality teaching. Statement 4, 'Relates theory to work-based practice' received 55% while 65% of the participants strongly agreed that teachers 'should encourage discussion in the classroom'. Definitely 85% of the participants strongly agreed that teachers 'should motivate students to study more'.

Regarding statement 7, 74% of the participants strongly agreed that teachers should 'enable students to understand the content of each lesson' and 'an effective teacher is patient with his/her students' was at 65%. It seems that also a good characteristic is 'prepared to explain all points presented', because 54% of the participants strongly agreed with it. Nonetheless, 80% of the participants strongly agreed that teachers should 'Respects students' opinions' and he/she should 'be approachable' (60%).

For statement 12, 'Is enthusiastic about teaching', participants do not find it so important and only 35% strongly agreed with it. However, for statement 13 'Gives clear guidance when asked for help', 75% of the participants strongly agreed. Also, 80% of the participants strongly agreed that teachers should 'Start sessions on time'. Only 25% of the participants strongly agreed that they should 'Include group activities' in their instruction, but definitively 'Summarise the main information in the end' (75%).

Additionally, regarding statement 17, 'Gives and accepts examples from their and student experiences', 42% of the participants strongly agreed. For statement 18, 'recognises learner differences', only half of the participants (50%) strongly agreed. While for statement 19, provides feedback, 85% of the participants find it very important and strongly disagreed. Finally, 70% of the participants strongly agreed that the teacher should 'Allow time for tasks'.

3.2. Teacher Questionnaire Results

The teacher questionnaire is divided into two parts, A and B. The statements in part A asked the participants to express their attitude towards teaching and part B asked the participants to show the situations where teaching is most effective.

Items SD D U A SA

Part A. Teachers attitudes towards teaching

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1. Teaching helps in making a person more progressive
 2. A good teacher is creative
 3. A teacher has to be well prepared for the class
 4. Trained teachers are more confident than untrained ones in solving students' problems

5. Good teaching demands effective communication abilities
6. Good relationship between teacher and student is essential for effective teaching
7. Classroom teaching strengthens the desire to learn
8. Good teaching demands effective communication abilities
9. Teachers should be authoritative in the classroom to teach effectively

Figure 3. Part A of the teacher questionnaire

In response to item 1 “Teaching helps in making a person more and more progressive”, majority of the respondents 60% strongly agreed with this statement. However, around 90% of the participants strongly agreed that “a good teacher is creative”. Regarding statement 3 “A teacher has to be well prepared for the class” 85% of the participants strongly agreed with it. It is also believed by the majority of the participants 80%, who strongly agreed, that “Trained teachers are more confident than untrained ones in solving students problem”. Around 45% of the participants strongly agreed that there should be “Good relationships between teacher and student”.

Regarding statement 7 “Classroom teaching strengthens the desire to learn” 62% of the participants strongly agreed with this while in response to question 8 “Good teaching demands effective communication abilities” 78% of the participants strongly agreed with this. Finally, only 20% of the participants strongly agreed that “teachers should be authoritative in the classroom to teach effectively”. It seems that the participants are not in favor of this teacher role in the classroom.

Items	SD	D	U	A	SA
Part B - Teacher effectiveness					
10. I use different methods to motivate my students					
11. I develop students' interests in the lesson					
12. I am fully conversant with the instructional objectives of the lesson					
13. I allow my students enough time for their assignments					
14. I assess my students objectively					
15. I try my best to solve pupils' problems in the classroom					
16. I have proper rapport with my students					
17. I always check my students' homework					
18. I take interested in co-curricular activities organised in the school					

Figure 4. Part B of the teacher questionnaire

Regarding statement 10, ‘I use different methods to motivate my students’, 75% of the participants strongly agreed with it. Similarly, the results of question 11, ‘I develop students’ interest in the lesson’ show that 65% of the participants strongly agreed with it. Regarding, statement 12, ‘I am fully conversant with the instructional objectives of the lesson’, half of the participants (50%) strongly agreed with it. Nevertheless, 80% of the participants strongly agreed that ‘they allow enough time for their students to do their assignments’.

Regarding statement 14, 'I assess my students objectively', 80% of the participants strongly agreed with it, while 55% of the participants strongly agreed that they 'try hard to solve pupils problem in the classroom'. It seems that having 'a proper rapport with the students' is important in good teaching, 84% of the participants strongly agreed with this statement. Finally, half of the participants (50%) reported that they check the students' homework and only 35% of the participants strongly agreed that they 'are interested in taking co-curricular activities organised at school'.

3.3. Student Reflections

The third data collection instrument was student reflections. Reflection papers are very helpful to write about useful classroom experiences. They also allow students the chance to reinforce what they have learned through coursework. There were 15 participants who were very involved in this stage of the research. The following are some excerpts taken from the student reflections.

Student reflections

- *Reflection 1:* I like Skills classes, especially watching a movie in the class. It helped me to focus more and practice the language. The teacher asked us to discuss the movie and I learned some new words. I think this is a very good way of teaching.
- *Reflection 2:* I enjoy methodology classes because the teacher always relates her experience with the teaching situation. I am able to understand the issue better than if I just read some info on my book. Another activity that helps me learn more effectively is group work and lesson planning.
- *Reflection 3:* I think that our literature teacher is very good because I have learned a lot from him, especially in analysing different novels and their characters. That somehow helps to better know human character.
- *Reflection 4:* I think that my Skills teacher is very good because we stimulate many real-life situations. One situation involved a job interview and I am sure that I will need it for my future life.

4. Conclusion

This study aimed to shed light on a very important issue in education, qualitative teaching. Based on the overall results of the study, it can be concluded that effective teaching involves preparedness for the class, training, communication ability and creativity. Additionally, the teacher should be knowledgeable of the content area and use different techniques to motivate his/her students in the class. Another important component which leads to successful teaching is the training that teachers received during their teaching career.

It is also worth to mention that good teachers must possess the following characteristics: knowledge of subject area, motivating students to study more, respect student opinions, start classes on time and provide feedback. The participants find it very important that teachers assess their students objectively and allow enough time for them to do their assignments.

In terms of good teaching and its impact on student achievement, it seems that a variety of teaching techniques which address different learning styles can have a positive impact on student overall achievement in the class. Useful teaching practices identified by the participants are discussion of a movie in order to develop speaking skills, relating classroom topics with those from real life and analyzing different characters from novels. It seems that students like to practice things which will be applied in the future.

To conclude, achieving quality in teaching requires commitment and hard work from the teachers' side, teachers should always look back and improve teaching by reflecting and creating a supportive and safe environment for all learners.

4.1. Recommendations

Recommendations for teachers – Since the teacher’s role is very important in improving the quality of teaching, he/she should always be open to changes required by the institutions and by modern education in general. Teachers should also attend professional development training in order to follow the latest trends in education.

Recommendations for pedagogy – Teachers should consider how to design a lesson that gradually addresses students’ needs and interests in order to increase learner motivation.

For further research, future studies should focus on more specific elements which are needed to improve education, especially in environments where the students were educated in the teacher-centred classroom. These learners need continuous support for becoming independent learners.

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