

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

EFL Teacher's Views on Fundamentals of English Language Teaching

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Ethical Statement

Ethical standards were rigorously followed. It has received ethical approval from the Çanakkale Onsekiz Mart University School of Graduate Studies Ethics Committee (Approval No. E-84026528-050.01.04-2100238530).

Funding Information

No funding was received for the study.

Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest is present in the conduction or the reporting of this study.

ABSTRACT

English language teachers often find themselves in a setting much like a football match where the ultimate aim is to score a GOAL: helping students learn English. To achieve this, EFL teachers draw on a wide range of practices and personal values. This study set out to explore what these teachers consider most essential in their work by tapping into their lived experiences and professional beliefs. Using the metaphor of the "Starting Eleven of a TEAM," participants were asked to name the eleven most important elements they believe are necessary for effective language teaching. Adopting a mixed method sequential exploratory design, the research began with a qualitative phase involving 53 teachers, who shared their individual 'line-ups'—the qualities or strategies they rely on most. Through careful content analysis, 55 recurring themes were identified, which then formed the basis of a structured questionnaire. In the second phase, this questionnaire was distributed to 750 EFL teachers via online survey. Their responses not only validated the earlier themes but also allowed us to see which qualities stood out across a much larger sample. According to the findings, the "best players" in EFL teachers' Starting Elevens included: loving the profession, caring for students, having strong knowledge of English, being open to innovation, showing friendliness, nurturing a love for English, creating a positive classroom environment, being reliable, respecting students' voices, showing patience, and understanding learners' needs. Together, these qualities paint a compelling picture of what today's EFL teachers believe matters most in the classroom.

Keywords: EFL, ELT, fundamentals, teachers' perspectives

Received:24/01/2025

Accepted: 11/06/2025

INTRODUCTION

Teaching a foreign language can be considered as a long and in some respects a complex process. There are many issues, factors, and aspects to consider in this long and complex process. In this long process that requires continuity and consistency, there are various parties involved, such as teachers and students. Indeed, the teacher has the identity of a guide, playmaker and planner while teaching a language (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). A good teacher should have strong leadership qualities, be able to inspire and motivate their students, and create a positive team culture and a safe environment for the learners. From this standpoint, it can be inferred that the role of a teacher is quite similar to the role of a soccer manager. In this respect, it can be stated that students and soccer players also have similar roles in their own journeys. The only difference is their purpose; while the students' purpose is to learn a language, the football players' purpose is to win the match.

In the field of English Language Teaching (ELT), the role of the teacher extends far beyond mere knowledge transmission; it entails managing, orchestrating, and inspiring a team toward a shared objective - learning a language. Just as a soccer manager meticulously prepares strategies, motivates players, fosters team spirit, and adapts tactics based on the dynamics of the match, an EFL teacher must skillfully navigate classroom realities to ensure effective learning outcomes.

According to Day (1999), a teacher's role can be perceived as a combination of manager, motivator, and mentor, where classroom management and emotional leadership are inseparable components of educational success. Similarly, Doyle (1986) asserts that classroom management is akin to maintaining "the playing field" where learning (the match) can occur without disruption. In this analogy, the teacher is responsible for setting the game plan (lesson planning), positioning players (student grouping), adjusting mid-game strategies (lesson adaptation), and celebrating victories (learning milestones). Moreover, just as a soccer manager tailors training to the strengths and weaknesses of each player, a teacher must differentiate instruction based on students' linguistic needs, learning styles, and motivational levels (Tomlinson, 2001). A well-managed classroom, like a well-coached team, displays cohesion, shared purpose, and resilience - essential elements for achieving learning goals.

The "Starting Eleven" metaphor captures this dynamic perfectly. Each quality or practice that an EFL teacher prioritizes - such as patience, positivity, knowledge, flexibility - can be seen as a vital player in the teacher's educational strategy. Without a well-balanced team, success is unlikely. Thus, winning the 'match' of language acquisition depends not only on technical knowledge but also on leadership, emotional intelligence, and strategic foresight, all central attributes of both effective teachers and successful managers. Through this metaphorical lens, the classroom transforms into a dynamic arena where teachers, like managers, foster growth, adapt to changing conditions, and lead their teams toward shared victories - the mastery of a new language.

To create an effective educational environment, it is important for teachers to be strong leaders. A good teacher who is also a strong leader brings along students with high participation in the lesson (Leithwood et al., 2004). Therefore, EFL teachers, like teachers of other branches, need students who are motivated, participative, and open to learning just as a soccer manager who needs strong players. It can be referred that for an effective teaching practice ensuring students' participation in the lesson can be considered as a necessity. There are lots of different thoughts and beliefs regarding effective teaching practice which embrace highly involved participation of the students.

Based on the previously mentioned similarities between English teachers and soccer managers, it can be stated that

the English teachers who are in the classroom are managing a soccer match, and they must win the match with their team by making their students score goals, which is learning English. In other words, it can be stated that an English language teacher who manage to teach English to their students can be seen as a soccer manager who help his team score a goal and win the match. To score a goal and win the match, in other words to teach English it can be observed that EFL teachers pay attention to different matters in their teaching practices. EFL teachers have different thoughts, beliefs, and opinions. The aim of this study is to explore the fundamentals of English Language Teaching by investigating the aforementioned different thoughts, views, beliefs, and opinions of EFL teachers. In order to examine these different attitudes of English language teachers regarding the most important 11 issues that are necessary for their teaching, the "Starting Eleven of a TEAM" metaphor was used in the study.

The perception of what it means to be an effective English Language teacher by focusing on the mainstream elements of the field and the reflections related to the characteristics of a good teacher are addressed by referring to many studies. English Language teachers' particularity is clarified by a range of captions which support the overall process of foreign language teaching. Simplifying these captions paves the way for understanding the nature of teaching itself. A surgeon can treat a patient's illness that sleeps during the surgery, and a lawyer can successfully justify a client that remains silent through the trial, but the nature of an effective teacher is heavily dependent on the student's highly involved participation (Fenstermacher, 1990).

It is a fact that there are basic components in foreign language teaching. Among them, it cannot be denied that knowledge plays a significant role in the way of foreign language teaching. A teacher, adorned with knowledge, is perfected to meet the anticipation of students. Borg (1998) states that knowledge of teachers is composed of a general teacher perceptual framework and clarified as what teachers know, believe, and think. As a matter of fact, what determines the overall performance of teachers in a classroom and what has a significant effect on student learning outcomes can be explained with what teachers know and how they reflect (Connelly et al., 1997).

Effective access to knowledge passes through an effective teacher's path. It is natural for the teacher to have characteristics of the field as well as the overall features of an effective teacher regarding the concept of an effective English language teacher (Sternberg & Horvath, 1995). There are numerous factors that make up the perception of effective teachers and these components somehow play an effective role in students' learning processes. One of these components is the characteristics of the teachers. Throughout the teaching session, the way they use their experience, how they balance their tone of voice, in which way they perform their ability to use their sub-skills and similar features determine how effectively students learn a foreign language. This means that the characteristics of teachers may have a direct impact on students' performances in the way they learn. A successful learner is therefore strongly connected to an effective teacher who organizes and accomplishes his own language acquirement (Karen, 2001).

In order to positively affect the students' learning processes, only teachers' knowledge and their characteristics are certainly not sufficient. Yet, the degree of their love for their job is directly proportional to the effectiveness of the training process. For students, learning the language can be an enjoyable hobby rather than a mandatory procedure thanks to the teachers who do their job with love. Based on this, teachers should leave their negative emotions aside and feed their students with positive emotions. A foreign language learning environment based on love and affection has numerous advantages for the students as it provides them with motivation and emotional back-up. Teachers who have advanced ties with their students, who feel priceless and satisfied by them and who have the feeling that this emotional work deposits itself in operative learning for the students should feel supported (Hargreaves, 2000).

Therefore, teachers' welfare may benefit from close relationships with their students in a classroom setting and play an important role in a holistic process of teaching.

Since it shapes and supports teaching conditions, love for learners facilitates taking an initial step for both an ongoing and overall practice of teaching language. Defining the positive learning and teaching conditions for ELT is a complex issue because of the dynamics reflecting and providing positive learning atmosphere. It is a well-known fact that language is the key tool for communication. Therefore, teaching a language is dramatically related to teaching how to communicate. The reason why teachers also should take the factors which affect communication skills into consideration during the teaching process is because language teaching practice is facilitated by emotional circumstances such as motivation, attitude and self-confidence. According to Lennartsson (2008), motivation and wish to learn a language are thought of as the most important factors in terms of positivity in language learning.

One of the factors constituting the positive learning and teaching condition is the personality of the teachers. Key indicators such as being equal and friendly or the terms called flexibility and reliability are strongly associated with teacher personality. Mayer (2005, p. 296) interprets personality as "the organized, developing system within the individual that represents the collective action of that individual's major psychological subsystems". Recent studies have simply shown that understanding a teacher's personality is particularly relevant to mastering the English language (Gibbons, 2003). A teacher's personality ascribes to the internal virtues of a teacher, resulting from the teacher's interpretation of principles, views, manners, and perceptions (Stronge et al., 2004).

It can be presumed that personality and effectiveness cannot be separated from each other because these two form teaching practice. As a topic of interest in the field of EFL, teacher effectiveness has been given crucial focus for many years. As Hativa et al. (2001) mentioned, teacher effectiveness is about recognizing the idea that indicates what being a good teacher really means. In order to complete a successful foreign language learning process, it is crucial that teachers achieve a clear understanding of what students' need and percept for effective learning. What is important for effective learning is described by Anderson et al. (1979) as the reflective ongoing process of what teachers do in terms of what students need and understand in classrooms. However, interpreting effective process is not a simple matter of fact because there are various factors affecting effectiveness. Although a few researchers have an agreement on what specific behaviors provide effectiveness, they, at least, agree on the fact that there are some particular dimensions for the dynamics of effectiveness. One of the most important factors affecting effectiveness is providing compatibility between teachers and learners (Dunkin, 1995).

In order to achieve a language outcome from students all fundamental components should be also provided. From a different point of view, it can be also stated that teaching a foreign language requires a good teacher. The characteristics of a good teacher are defined by different researchers in various studies. Mehta (2012, p.2) made an extended review explaining that "A variety of personal characteristics have been found to have significant effects on reports of job satisfaction including gender, race, age, marital status, children and education". It is not possible to ignore the fact that such individual factors play an active role in the language training of teachers.

As Bell (2005) states, there is no single common definition of an impactful foreign language teacher. However, Çubukçu (2010, p.2) propounds the idea that "professional characteristics include professional values, personal and professional development, communication and relationships as well as synthesis and application". In parallel with this perception, it is possible to assume that the characteristics of teachers are decisive on the students. Lamb and Wedell

(2013) remarkably refer that teachers are one of the most inspiring and boundless sources in the field of language learning. Therefore, these components that make up the whole are what make a teacher effective in the process of foreign language teaching. All these elements remarked above are shaped by perceptions of the ones who are involved in teaching progress.

Although there have been different studies investigating the effects of teacher perception, only a few of them shed light on the effectiveness of teacher and student perception for the overall teaching process. One of the studies investigating the characteristics of an ideal teacher by Telli et al. (2008) highlighted that the concept of an ideal teacher should be the one who facilitates, motivates and supports the learners. Besides, this study includes the combination of teachers' and students' perceptions instead of comparing them. Another study conducted by Barnes and Lock (2013) investigated the characteristics of effective English teachers by studying the perceptions of students. As a result of the study, it was found that the assumptions of the learners are shaped by some characteristics of effective teachers such as encouraging the learners, giving clear instructions or feedback and being highly ambitious about teaching and reflecting it to learners. In the research carried out by Çelik et al. (2013), it was intended to find out the concept of an effective language teacher by inquiring students to define their perceptions of an effective teacher. The result of the study indicates that students' preferences regarding the idea of an effective teacher included emotional concerns such as teachers who discern learners' needs and embrace their persuasion. Finally, a study noticed by Brown (2009) mainly focuses on the perceptions of students and teachers. The purpose of the study was to enlighten the certain characteristics of both samples so as to find out whether they were identical or not. As reported by the results, there were highly conflicted utterances mentioned by the participants from the standpoint of teaching styles, second language practice, embedded group activities and evaluation process.

All outcomes obtained from the studies pave the way for understanding the chain reaction between the perceptions and effective teacher characteristics. Lastly, Zamani and Ahangari (2016) summarized by defining the importance of discovering what students need during the process of language learning. Teachers are responsible for making teaching practice more reflective in terms of understanding the demands. In the field of ELT, a significant body of research has explored the characteristics of effective language teachers, emphasizing factors such as subject knowledge, classroom management skills, teacher personality traits, emotional intelligence, and the ability to motivate students (Borg, 1998; Hargreaves, 2000). However, despite extensive research on individual teacher qualities, there is a lack of integrative frameworks that conceptualize how these multiple factors interact dynamically in the teaching process. In particular, metaphoric models that view teaching as a complex, team-based, and strategic endeavor remain underexplored.

While studies have investigated specific traits of effective teachers, few have used a holistic, systems-thinking approach that treats teaching as a multifaceted and cooperative "team effort," rather than as isolated personal qualities. There is a need to reconceptualize teacher effectiveness in ways that better reflect the realities of classroom practice, where various competencies and attitudes must work together harmoniously - much like players on a sports team. To date, little research has employed metaphorical approaches to capture this dynamic and interactive aspect of teaching. The metaphor "Starting Eleven of a TEAM" - borrowed from soccer - was selected for this study to offer a novel and relatable way of understanding the collective and strategic nature of teaching practice. In soccer, success depends not on the excellence of a single player, but on the synergy of all players fulfilling complementary roles under the guidance of the manager. Similarly, in EFL classrooms, an effective teacher must balance multiple qualities and skills

simultaneously - motivation, knowledge, empathy, adaptability, communication - to create a successful learning environment. By asking teachers to identify their "Starting Eleven", this study encourages participants to prioritize and reflect on the set of attributes they perceive as essential for successful teaching. This metaphor also acknowledges that teaching is not a static skill set but a dynamic orchestration of multiple competencies, much like coaching a winning soccer team. Thus, the study aims to fill a gap in literature by providing an integrative, metaphor-based model of teacher effectiveness in EFL contexts. It addresses the research question: "What are the most important qualities and competencies that EFL teachers prioritize as essential for effective English language teaching, conceptualized through the 'Starting Eleven of a TEAM' metaphor?" By doing so, the study offers a fresh perspective on how teachers view the core fundamentals of their practice, moving beyond linear lists of traits toward a more systemic and interconnected understanding.

METHOD

This study employed a mixed method sequential exploratory research design (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). to systematically investigate EFL teachers' views on the essential elements of effective ELT. The rationale for adopting this design was to first explore participants' perspectives qualitatively and then validate and expand upon these findings quantitatively, ensuring a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

In the first qualitative phase, data were collected from 53 EFL teachers through an open-ended written task. Participants were asked to conceptualize their teaching practices by forming their "TEAM", listing the eleven most important attributes, skills, or factors they believed were essential for successful ELT. This innovative use of the "Starting Eleven of a TEAM" metaphor served to prompt participants to think holistically about teaching, drawing connections between effective pedagogy and the coordinated functioning of a sports team. Participants' responses were then systematically subjected to content analysis to identify recurring ideas, themes, and patterns. Through iterative coding and thematic categorization, a total of 55 distinct themes emerged, representing a broad range of professional, emotional, pedagogical, and interpersonal dimensions deemed critical by the participants.

Building upon the qualitative findings, a structured questionnaire was subsequently developed, incorporating the 55 identified themes as individual items. The questionnaire aimed to assess the degree of importance that a larger, more diverse sample of EFL teachers attributed to each theme. In the second quantitative phase, the questionnaire was distributed via online survey platform to 750 EFL teachers across various educational settings and regions. This phase enabled a broader and more statistically grounded exploration of the priorities identified during the initial phase. Descriptive statistical analyses were conducted to determine the overall trends, highlighting the attributes most consistently valued by EFL teachers. Moreover, the large-scale data collection allowed for the examination of potential differences in teachers' perceptions based on variables such as gender, workplace type, and professional experience.

Overall, the sequential exploratory design allowed for the deep generation of insights during the qualitative phase and the broad validation of findings during the quantitative phase, thus strengthening the credibility, generalizability, and depth of the study's conclusions.

Prior to participation, individuals were informed about the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of their involvement, and the intended use and interpretation of the data. This information was clearly presented through a standalone consent statement at the beginning of the survey. Informed consent was obtained digitally, with participants providing acknowledgment of their understanding and agreement to participate. To protect participants' privacy and

encourage candid responses, no personally identifiable information was collected. All survey submissions were anonymous. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any point by closing the survey without submitting their responses. Additionally, all quotations and interpretive comments derived from the data were reported in aggregate form, ensuring that individual participants could not be identified.

RESULTS

As stated, the study was conducted in two phases thus, the results will be handled consecutively as the results of the first phase and the results of the second phase. For the first phase of the study, the most important 11 issues were written by the participants, and the emerging 55 themes are listed in Table 1 below. The numbers given in the right column of the themes indicate the number of times these themes were mentioned by the participants.

Table 1. Hyper-categories that emerged in content analysis of the comments.

Order	Themes	Frequency
1	Loving Students - Children	332
2	Loving Your Job / to Teach	297
3	Knowledge of English Language	275
4	Patience	251
5	Being Open to Innovations - New Ideas	193
6	Knowledge about and Use of Teaching Methods and Techniques	143
7	Well-Prepared - Variety of Materials	109
8	Good at Speaking / Communication Skills / Pronunciation	82
9	Enjoyable, Interesting Activities & Games	80
10	Motivated Students	78
11	Being Friendly - Approachable - Thoughtful	68
12	Knowledge About Students, Their Names, etc.	67
13	Classroom Management	61
14	Creativity - Having Creative Ideas	57
15	Being Self-Confident	55
16	Learner Autonomy Making Students Independent Learners	55
17	Well-Prepared Lesson Plans	52
18	Use of Fun and Humor	45
19	Valuing Students - Respecting Their Ideas	44
20	Giving Effective Feedback	42
21	Knowledge on Assessment, Testing and Evaluation	42
22	Being Equal / Fair	40
23	Understanding Students' Needs	40
24	Collaboration with Parents - Supportive Parents	37
25	Self-Reflection - Self Assessment	36
26	Being Energetic	32
27	Giving Clear Instructions	29
28	Manageable Workload - Less Working Hours	29
29	Loving English and Making Learners Love It	28
30	Sufficient Conditions (English Classroom - Computer, Etc)	26
31	Use of Target Language (English) in the Class	26
32	Abilities to Sing - Draw - Act - Play Instruments	25
33	Embracing and Making Differences	25
34	Having Discipline - Disciplined Classroom	24
35	Time Management	24

36	Positive Learning Atmosphere - Making Them Feel Confident	24
37	Being Reliable	22
38	Effective Course Book-Curriculum	22
39	To Inspire and Getting Inspired	22
40	Educational Songs - Loving Music	21
41	Knowing How to Use Technology	21
42	Flexibility	20
43	Being Empathetic	18
44	Collaboration with Colleagues - Supportive Colleagues	18
45	Being Crazy	17
46	Being Calm under Any Circumstances	16
47	Having Holiday	16
48	Sufficient Income - Salary - Money	15
49	Experience	15
50	Manageable Number of Students	13
51	Being Model for Students	12
52	Using Your Voice Effectively	11
53	World Knowledge	11
54	Assigning Out-Of-Class Tasks - Homework	10
55	Practice, Revision and Repetition	10

According to Table 1, we can see that the three themes that are most important according to the participants are loving students-children, loving the teaching job, and knowledge of English language respectively. Besides, we can also see that the three themes that are least important according to the participants are using your voice effectively, world knowledge, and assigning out-of-class tasks or giving homework respectively.

For the second phase of the study, researchers made use of a questionnaire, which includes the 55 items listed in Table 1, and collected quantitative data from 750 EFL teachers via online survey platform. In this phase, the 11 themes most frequently mentioned by the participants are drawn.

The results of the second phase reveal that EFL teachers' best players to score a GOAL were firstly loving your job / to teach as stated by 96.9% of the participants. Secondly, the results also show that EFL teachers' best players to score a GOAL were loving students / children as stated by 95.6% of the participants. Thirdly, it can be said that EFL teachers' best players to score a GOAL were knowledge of English language as stated by the 95.2% of the participants. According to the findings, it was clear that the 3 themes most included in the starting 11 by the participants are respectively loving your job / to teach, loving students / children, and knowledge of English language.

The results reveal that EFL teachers' best players to score a GOAL were fourthly being open to innovations / new ideas as stated by the 93.2% of the participants; fifthly being friendly / approachable / thoughtful as stated by the 92.5% of the participants; sixthly loving English and making learners love it as stated by the 92.1% of the participants. Afterwards in seventh and eighth place, EFL teachers' best players to score a GOAL were creating a positive learning atmosphere / making students feel confident and being reliable with a 92% score. The results also show that EFL teachers' ninth, tenth, and eleventh best players to score a GOAL were respectively valuing students / respecting their ideas (91.9%), having patience (91.6%), and finally understanding students' needs (91.6%).

Table 2. Integration of Results.

Order	Options Not Provided (Qualitative)	Options Provided (Quantitative)
1	Loving Students	Loving Your Job
2	Loving Your Job	Loving Students
3	English Knowledge	English Knowledge
4	Patience	Being Open to Innovations
5	Being Open to Innovations	Being Friendly
6	Knowledge about and Use of Teaching Methods and Techniques	Loving English and Making Learners Love It
7	Well-Prepared - Variety of Materials	Positive Learning Atmosphere
8	Good at Speaking / Communication Skills / Pronunciation	Being Reliable
9	Enjoyable, Interesting Activities & Games	Valuing Students / Respecting Their Ideas
10	Motivated Students	Patience
11	Being Friendly	Understanding Students' Needs

In Table 2, we can see the comparison of the results obtained within the first and second stages of the study. The themes on the left row of the table are qualitative data, while the themes on the right are quantitative data. According to Table 2, we can see that the themes loving students, loving your job, having knowledge of English, being patient and friendly, and being open to innovation are common in the qualitative and quantitative results of the study.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the most critical factors that EFL teachers perceive as fundamental to effective English language teaching, using the “Starting Eleven of a TEAM” metaphor to structure and prioritize these attributes. The findings provide valuable insights into teachers’ beliefs and values, revealing a complex interplay between professional competencies, emotional factors, and interpersonal skills.

The results indicated that the top priorities for EFL teachers were, respectively: loving students, loving the profession, possessing knowledge of English, patience, openness to innovation, knowledge and use of teaching methods and techniques, being well-prepared with a variety of materials, having strong communication skills, designing enjoyable and engaging activities, motivating students, and being friendly and approachable. This constellation of factors highlights a holistic understanding of teaching, blending cognitive, affective, and social dimensions.

The prominence of emotional factors - such as “loving students” and “loving the job” - at the top of the Starting Eleven is particularly striking. This finding aligns with previous literature emphasizing the emotional labor inherent in teaching (Hargreaves, 2000) and suggests that affective commitment may be just as crucial as professional skills in fostering an effective learning environment. Emotional connectedness between teachers and students creates trust, motivation, and resilience, which are fundamental to language acquisition processes.

Similarly, the emphasis placed on “patience” and “being friendly-approachable-thoughtful” reflects the critical importance of teacher-student relationships. This is consistent with findings by Çelik et al. (2013) and Telli et al. (2008), who noted that students often perceive affective qualities such as empathy, fairness, and approachability as indicators of teacher effectiveness. The present study corroborates that teachers themselves recognize these attributes as central to successful teaching.

On the cognitive and pedagogical side, the prioritization of “knowledge of English language” and “knowledge and use of teaching methods and techniques” supports previous research by Borg (1998) and Connelly et al. (1997), which

highlighted that teachers' subject matter knowledge and pedagogical expertise form the foundation of effective instruction. However, it is important to note that while content knowledge is indispensable, it is not sufficient on its own. Teachers' abilities to communicate effectively, create positive emotional climates, and engage learners creatively are equally emphasized in the findings.

The participants' strong emphasis on "being open to innovations" and "being well-prepared with a variety of materials" highlights their awareness of the dynamic nature of language education. In an era where technological tools, teaching methodologies, and student expectations are constantly evolving, adaptability and preparedness become indispensable qualities for modern educators. This supports the work of Mercer and Gregersen (2020), which argued that teacher resilience and openness to change are key predictors of professional success in the 21st-century educational landscape.

The metaphorical framework of the "Starting Eleven" also illuminates how teachers perceive their roles not as isolated acts of competency, but as an orchestrated synergy of multiple qualities - much like players on a sports team fulfilling different yet complementary roles. This holistic perception challenges traditional models that narrowly define teacher effectiveness in terms of either content mastery or classroom management. Instead, it suggests a systems view where success is determined by the harmonious integration of cognitive skills, emotional intelligence, and interpersonal sensitivity.

Another noteworthy point is the balance between personal traits and professional skills in the participants' selections. Qualities such as patience, friendliness, and love for students represent enduring personal traits, whereas skills such as effective communication, use of engaging activities, and mastery of teaching techniques represent professional competencies that can be developed and refined. This dual emphasis implies that effective teaching demands both inherent personal dispositions and continuous professional growth.

Furthermore, while previous studies often focus separately on either student or teacher perceptions of effectiveness (e.g., Barnes & Lock, 2013; Brown, 2009), the current study brings forth teachers' self-assessments, offering direct insight into their internal prioritization of attributes. This perspective is critical, as teachers' self-concept strongly influences their instructional practices, motivation, and emotional well-being.

Despite the valuable contributions, it is important to recognize that the cultural and institutional contexts within which teachers operate may influence their prioritizations. For instance, EFL teachers working in regions where emotional bonding and relational trust are culturally emphasized may place greater importance on affective factors than teachers in contexts with more transactional views of education. Therefore, future research could investigate the cross-cultural applicability of the Starting Eleven metaphor in different educational settings.

The results suggest practical implications for teacher education and professional development. Programs aimed at preparing future EFL teachers should not only strengthen linguistic and pedagogical competencies but also cultivate emotional intelligence, relational skills, and adaptability. Teacher training curricula might benefit from integrating modules that focus explicitly on building resilience, empathy, and student-centered communication strategies. The findings reaffirm that successful EFL teaching is a multidimensional endeavor, where emotional commitment, cognitive expertise, and pedagogical adaptability must function together - like a well-coordinated team - to achieve the ultimate goal: effective and meaningful student learning.

Although linguistic competence is a key requirement for English language teachers, the results of this study have shown that being a professional teacher extends much further than language competence alone. In participant interviews, they highlighted that a genuine love for the job, and real care for students, are the underpinnings of good teaching practice. They strongly felt that loving your job, and valuing your learners as people, were more than emotional bonuses, but critical components for a successful classroom relationship. In addition to these important affective elements in their teaching, participants also pointed to a number of personal and interpersonal characteristics that they thought were important for teaching language effectively. Among the most frequently mentioned personal and interpersonal characteristics were patience; openness to new ways of teaching; and friendliness/approachability. These characteristics, which can be understood as aspects of emotional intelligence; and reported adaptability, were continually highlighted as important in developing rapport and being responsive to learners' developing needs and maintaining learners' engagement.

Critically, the study findings also suggest that when teachers are constantly faced with obstacles in their professional practice, such issues are not always related to the lack of technical knowledge or pedagogical preparation. Rather, such issues are sometimes more likely to relate to personality and emotional dispositions that contribute to issues in relational or motivational elements of teaching. This makes one contemplate once more the significance of self-awareness, reflective practices, and psychological readiness in the process of teacher development.

In a sense, as a metaphorical summary of the study findings, one might say that "the word *teacher* has an 'ache' in it" as a poetic reminder that while teaching is a fulfilling pursuit, it can also be an emotional heavy-lifting task. To cope with that ache and help move towards a healthier way of completing it, teachers need to comprise a surrogate professional 'team' within themselves. This means aligning their values, skills, emotions and strategies into a cohesive unit (not strictly dissimilar to selecting the best professionals in a collective football strategy team). The more these 'players' are aligned and cohesive, the more resilient and better positioned they are in the presence of numerous, complex lays and obstacles in the teaching environment.

This study is not without limitations. Although the participant recruitment was diverse, as a collection of teachers the numbers are representative of a particular region and context, which limits its ability to be generalized. In addition, the data were generated from self-reported perceptions - which are acceptable, yet the complexities of speaking about in-classroom behavior might not always be appropriate. Future research could investigate the extent to which demographic variables, such as gender, teaching context, institutional type, or years of experience significantly affect how teachers prioritize these professional and emotional characteristics. Expanding the inquiry across cross-cultural or longitudinal dimensions may also provide deeper insight into how teachers' values evolve over time and in response to shifting educational demands.

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