

What Do Teacher Education Students Tell Us about the Teaching Performance of English Language Lecturers?

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ABSTRACT

The pressing need for greater improvement in teacher education is a major concern amidst recent public debates on the quality of school teachers today. Although there have been countless discussions and debates related to effectiveness of teacher training, the issue has yet to be resolved. Thus this study aimed to investigate students' evaluation of the teaching performance of English language lecturers. This study employed a quantitative research methodology using students' end of semester evaluations to assess teaching performance of English language lecturers in one of the teacher education institutes in Sarawak. A total of 1060 evaluation forms were collected and 18 English language lecturers were evaluated. Analysis of the data showed that none of the aspects surveyed on English language lecturers' teaching performance was given an 'excellent' rating by the students. Instead, empirical data revealed that the performance of English language lecturers was perceived as either 'good' or 'very good.' The findings showed that these English language lecturers performed better in four aspects which were related to providing awareness on the development of human capital; the ability in conducting teaching learning activities in accordance to the course pro-forma; commitment towards teaching and learning; and monitoring and giving feedback. However, the ratings towards the English language lecturers' performance dropped in six other aspects: engaging active participation in learning; providing thought provoking activities; motivating students to pursue learning activities; implementing course assignments aligned to topics taught; effective management of teaching and learning activities and presenting clear presentations. In terms of gender differences, the study found that female English language lecturers were perceived as better performers than male lecturers and the differences were found to be statistically significant. Implications and recommendations of the study were also included in the paper.

KEYWORDS: teacher education, teaching performance, student evaluation

Introduction

In an increasingly diverse and complex teaching and learning environment in institutions of higher learning, the area of primary concern is good quality teaching. In fact, years of research have proven that there is nothing more important for a learning institution to provide for their students than giving them effective lecturers. Jordan, Mendro, and Weerasinghe (1997) reported that spending a few years with effective teachers can put even the most disadvantaged students on the path to success, whereas a few years with ineffective teachers can deal students an academic blow from which they may never recover. Therefore, providing effective lecturers to students should be an utmost consideration in a higher institution of learning, both private and public.

In the competitive world of education today most institutions of learning and students at large demand for effective teaching and learning to take place, both inside and outside the classroom. They expect effective lecturers to help raise the level of students' motivation to learn so that students' academic and non-academic achievements can be further enhanced.

This would significantly contribute to the satisfaction of students in learning which in turn affects the image of the learning institution as well as student loyalty (Helgesen & Nasset, 2007). However, most of the time, lecturers pursue their own ideas or perceptions of effective teaching and learning. Although perceptions may vary according to subjects taught or individual areas of responsibility, lecturers need to know whether their teaching is well received by the students. One suitable method to measure teaching performance is students' evaluation of lecturers' performance, which is often carried out at the end of the semester or at the end of a course/programme in most institutions of learning.

Hence, this study aimed to investigate the students' perceptions of lecturers' teaching performance, particularly English language lecturers, at the end of the semester in order to gauge the overall teaching quality of these lecturers assigned to teach them throughout the semester. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the students' perceptions towards the teaching performance of English language lecturers?
2. Is there any significant difference in the teaching performance between male and female English language lecturers?

Literature review

Students' assessment or evaluation of teaching performance is not a recent phenomenon in the field of education. In fact, the initiative taken to evaluate teaching started as early as 1915 (Wachtel, 1998). According to Wachtel (1998), the first teacher rating scale was published in 1915 and the first study of students' evaluation of teaching performance was written in the 1920s. For many decades, the outcome of students' evaluation of teaching performance is seen as an important tool to measure teaching quality. It has been used to reflect on qualities associated with good teaching such as lecturers' knowledge, clarity, classroom management and course organization. Besides being a measurement tool on teaching performance, the feedback obtained from the evaluation can help the lecturer concerned to grow and develop professionally through self-reflecting on their practices. To the learning institution, the results of the evaluation are beneficial to the managing directors to identify specific areas for improving the performance of the lecturers (Yeoh, Ho & Chan, 2012) or organizing relevant continuous professional

development programmes for skill enhancement of the teaching staff. In some cases, the outcome of this evaluation is used to formulate key performance index of lecturers in staff appraisal for both promotion and tenure decisions (Griffin, 1999; Jensen, 2011; Liaw & Goh, 2003). Some policy makers may also use the information to make important decisions pertaining to compensation, re-hiring and termination of contract teaching staff. This implies that student evaluation of lecturers' teaching performance served to benefit every participating member of the education community. As the possible benefits that can be gained from students' evaluation are multifaceted and findings of such studies are considered reliable and valid, therefore, the importance of students' evaluation cannot be completely ignored.

In terms of differences in teaching performance according to gender, several empirical studies on students' evaluation revealed gender differences. Most studies reported that students, on the average, awarded lower rating for female educators than their male counterparts (Farley, 1996; Messner, 2000). For instance, a multivariate analysis of almost 17,000 student evaluations revealed significantly higher evaluation for male faculty (Hamermesh & Parker, 2005). Consistent with this finding was another study of evaluation gathered in 741 courses taught at 21 different institutions, which also showed that women faculty received significantly lower rating than male colleagues (Centra & Gaubatz, 2000). According to Farley (1996) and Messner (2000), students perceived their female teachers as biased, having an agenda, rigid, dogmatic, grumpy and angry while their male colleagues were seen as objective, relaxed and comfortable, flexible, open-minded, possessed good humour and fair. Although several studies have reported that male and female teachers received different evaluation ratings from students, it is the aim of this study to find out if this phenomenon exists in the current study context.

Method

Research design

This study aimed to investigate the perceptions of students towards the teaching performance of English language lecturers. The researcher employed a quantitative research methodology to address the predetermined research questions of the study.

Population

The population comprised all the students pursuing a teacher education programme in one of the teacher education institutes in Sarawak for the year 2013. A total of 884 students from various teacher education programmes took part in the study.

Instrumentation

Since 2009, all the students enrolled in this institute were required to evaluate their lecturers using an online teaching performance scale as specified by the Department of Standards Malaysia which is a member of the International Organization for Standardization (MS ISO), a body that monitors the quality of services rendered to the students. The scale consists of ten statements to determine lecturers' teaching performance such as keeping to the course outline, organizing teaching and learning activities, setting appropriate course assignment, getting students' involvement in the classroom, using suitable delivery methods, providing feedbacks, motivating students and lecturers' personality traits. Each statement is scored on a five-point Likert typed scale with a score of 1 indicating unsatisfactory teaching performance and a score of 5 to indicate excellent teaching performance. Completion of the evaluation form takes about 5-10 minutes.

Data collection procedure

Before the end of every semester, the students were instructed to complete an online evaluation form pertaining to the English language lecturers' teaching performance. This is a requirement set by the institute, in compliance with MS ISO, that all the teaching staff be evaluated by the students under their care. As a result of the evaluation process, the institute received 1060 completed evaluation forms submitted by the students during the 2013 academic year and 18 lecturers were evaluated.

Data analysis

Statistical analyses such as descriptive statistics were used to analyse the data. Among the descriptive statistics used were frequency distribution, measures of central tendency and measures of variability. Mean scores were calculated and standard deviations were used to measure variability. Inferential statistical testing was run to answer the second research question on significant differences according to gender.

Results and discussion***Students' perceptions of English language lecturers' teaching performance***

Students were given a 10-item instrument online to rate the English language lecturers' teaching performance. Table 1 displays the mean scores and standard deviations of the 10 items in descending order. The findings of the study revealed that none of the items were given a rating equivalent to 'excellent' teaching performance. Nevertheless, all the items achieved the minimum mean score of 4.50, the standard imposed by MS ISO. The students perceived the teaching performance of English language lecturers as 'very good' in 4 of the items while the remaining 6 items were rated as 'good'.

The four top performing items rated as 'very good' were related to providing awareness on the development of human capital (M=4.83); the ability in implementing teaching learning activities in accordance to the course pro-forma (M=4.81); commitment towards teaching and learning (M=4.81); and monitoring and giving feedbacks (M=4.80).

Table 1

Means and standard deviations of English language lecturers' teaching performance

No.	Items on Teaching Performance	Mean*	Std. Deviation
1	Provide awareness on human capital development	4.83	0.10
2	Implementation of teaching and learning activities in accordance to course pro-forma	4.81	0.13
3	Commitment and professionalise displayed when conducting teaching and learning activities,	4.81	0.12
4	Monitor and give feedbacks on student mastery of learning.	4.80	0.12
5	Active student participation in teaching and learning activities	4.79	0.12
6	Provision of learning activities that stimulate thinking	4.78	0.14
7	Motivate students to pursue learning activities.	4.77	0.13
8	Implementation of the course assignment according to topics taught	4.77	0.12
9	Effective management of teaching and learning activities	4.76	0.16
10	Clear presentation of course content.	4.72	0.18

* excellent (4.90-5.00) very good (4.80-4.89) good (4.70-4.79) satisfactory (4.60-4.69) marginal (4.50-4.59) unsatisfactory (1.00-4.49)

Among the ten items surveyed, the students perceived that the English language lecturers did extremely well in providing awareness on the development of human capital, which received the highest ratings from the students (M=4.83). Lecturers should be aware on the new and existing knowledge, competencies, social and personality attributes that are needed in the teaching profession. Due to the complexity of the profession, English language lecturers need to assist students to constantly learn, unlearn and relearn where necessary so that teaching and learning will always remain relevant. Hence, awareness in human capital development is important for both the trainers and trainees.

Students also perceived English language lecturers' competency in implementing teaching and learning activities in accordance to the course pro-forma as 'very good' (M=4.81). By adhering to the course pro-forma, students would be able to know what to learn, how much to learn, how they would be assessed and what area of content would be tested in the end-of-semester examination. Students perceived the course pro-forma as an important tool to help them, not only to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills pertaining to their area of specialization, but also to do well in course assignments and to pass the examination at the end of the semester.

Another item at the top was related to English language lecturers' commitment to teaching and learning (M=4.81). The students perceived their English language lecturers as committed to their teaching job. Commitment is important as it is one of the key factors of successful teaching and learning. Lecturers who are committed often showed concern towards the development of students' academic or non-academic achievements. Commitment is also displayed in how lecturers motivate students to learn, the efforts lecturers put in to prepare lectures, assignments and even comments made on tests and assignments. This finding showed that students perceived the lecturers as committed to teaching and learning.

Equally important are monitoring and giving feedbacks to students (M=4.80). Students want to know how well they are progressing and which areas of improvement are needed. According to Ip (2005), the knowledge that they are progressing well gives them a sense of achievement and motivates learning. At the same time, students need to know where they have gone wrong so that corrective measures can be taken. Hence, to be an effective English language lecturer, it is absolutely essential to monitor students' learning and give them feedback. There are various approaches that lecturers can choose to give feedbacks, such as, to individual students, to a group or to the whole class.

Among the ten items surveyed, the students perceived the English language lecturers' teaching performance as 'very good' in the above four aspects. However, the mean scores of English language lecturers' teaching performance dropped for the remaining six aspects. Although, the mean scores of their teaching performance achieved the minimum level imposed by MS ISO, the students perceived their teaching performance as 'good', which was one level lower in the teaching performance scale. The six areas were related to engaging active participation in learning (M=4.79); providing thought provoking activities (M=4.78); motivating students to pursue learning activities (M=4.77); implementing course assignments aligned to topics taught (M=4.77); effective management of teaching and learning activities (M=4.76); and giving clear presentations (M=4.72).

The ability of English language lecturers in eliciting active participation was perceived as good only. Student participation or engagement should be encouraged in today's classroom. Through participation, students possess higher self-confidence (Rocca, 2010), are more motivated (Junn, 1994), learn better (Weaver & Qi, 2005), improve communication skills (Dancer & Kamvounias,

2005) and are better critical thinkers (Crone, 1997). English language lecturers should recognize the importance of student participation and reduce dependence on teacher-centered teaching methodologies such as the lecture method, which reduces students' engagement in the lesson. In fact, the traditional lecture-only format is losing its prevalence in the classroom today. Instead, it has been replaced with a mixed delivery method such as group discussion, dyadic work or peer review to minimize lecturing. In-class participation has become increasingly important today especially among millennial generation students who demand more interaction from their classroom experience (Allred & Swenson, 2006; Howe & Strauss, 2000).

The next item in the evaluation of teaching performance, which was given a 'good' rating, was related to English language lecturers' use of learning activities that require thinking skills. Lecturers should be encouraged to use more thought-provoking learning activities where students can learn actively either through reading, writing, listening, questioning or reflecting as compared to the standard mode of instruction in which learners passively absorb the knowledge transmitted by the lecturer. There is a growing body of research that concluded that when students have ample opportunities to clarify, question and reflect, their critical thinking skills improve, retention and transfer of new information increase, motivation increases and interpersonal skills improve, resulting in overall improvement in quality of learning (Centre of Teaching and Learning, 2008). Therefore, English language lecturers need to create or provide more opportunities through thought-provoking learning activities to engage the students actively in the teaching and learning process. Such activities, among others, may include group discussion, problem solving, case studies, role play or journal writing.

Motivating students to learn is also important as motivation energizes, directs and sustains behaviour which keeps them going (Ormrod, 2008). The motivation would be reflected in their cognitive, emotional and behavioural engagement in learning activities (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004). It determines whether the learning activities are accomplished enthusiastically, apathetically or lackadaisically. Virtually, all students are motivated to learn but need the extra push from their lecturers to keep them going. By playing the role of a motivator, English language lecturers can help promote continuous learning as well as long-term success and productivity in the students.

A similar rating was given to the item related to course assignments. Students perceived the English language lecturers' teaching performance as 'good' in ensuring that assignments were developed based on the topics taught in class. For almost all the courses taken, students are required to accomplish a course assignment to enable the lecturer to assess their mastery and/or application of knowledge and skills acquired. Lecturers who assigned coursework aligned to what was taught served as useful guide to enable the students to accomplish the assignment successfully. It would not be appropriate to assign students to read or review materials that are not relevant to the course. Nor should students be assessed on knowledge and skills which are not specifically outlined as important in the course objectives. However, the students perceived that English language lecturers need to work on improving this aspect, that is, in formatting questions or developing activities in course assignments that are related to course content or course objectives.

The second last item in the ranking of teaching performance which was given a 'good' rating was related to effective management of teaching and learning activities, which formed an integral part of teaching performance. It can include setting suitable teaching and learning objectives, determining what to teach (knowledge, skills or attitudes), how to teach (approaches and strategies), how to assess (formative or summative) and deciding whether remedial or enrichment

programmes should be introduced as a follow-up to the lesson. Proper planning, organizing and managing teaching and learning activities can contribute to increasing students' motivation, involvement and cooperation in learning.

The last item that students rated as 'good' teaching performance was related to giving clear presentation of course content. English language lecturers should be able to give clear presentation to assist the students in making sense of and absorbing new knowledge and skills taught. Students would welcome lecturers who are able to present the material in a clear and logical sequence. The material presented must also be intelligible and meaningful to the students. It is important not to overburden them with too many main points in each lecture or use too many different types of presentation materials, which can confuse the learners.

Differences in teaching performance according to gender

Out of the 18 English language lecturers that were evaluated, 6 were female lecturers and 12 male lecturers. In terms of teaching performance according to gender, the findings showed that the rating for female lecturers (M= 4.80) were higher than male lecturers (M= 4.76) which implied that female English language lecturers were perceived as better performers than male lecturers. Further data analysis using the independent samples t-test as displayed in Table 2, shows that the difference in teaching performance with respect to gender was statistically significant. Hence, it can be concluded that female English language lecturers performed significantly better than male lecturers in teaching. This finding seems to contradict past studies, as generally, female educators were awarded a lower rating than their male counterparts (Farley, 1996; Messner, 2000; Hamermesh & Parker, 2005; Centra & Gaubatz, 2000).

Table 2

Independent sample t-test of teaching performance and gender

Gender	N	Mean	t	df	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	F	sig
Male	6	4.76						
Female	12	4.80	-.644	16	-.039	.061	4.933	.041

Implications and recommendations

The purpose of this study was to investigate English language lecturers' teaching performance using students' end-of-semester evaluation. The findings revealed that none of the ten items on lecturers' teaching performance was given an 'excellent' rating. The students perceived the teaching performance of English language lecturers as 'very good' in four of the items surveyed. These four items were related to the lecturers' ability in providing awareness on the development of human capital; conducting teaching learning activities in accordance to the course pro-forma; commitment towards teaching and learning; and monitoring and giving feedbacks. It is hoped that English language lecturers would continue to maintain the strengths as found in the empirical data of the study.

On the other hand, the findings also served to provide valuable information to English language lecturers on areas of personal improvement related to their teaching and learning performance. The students' perceptions on teaching performance towards the remaining six items were rated as 'good' which was one level lower in the teaching performance scale. These items were related to engaging active participation in learning; providing thought provoking activities; motivating students to pursue learning activities; implementing course assignments aligned to topics taught;

effective management of teaching and learning activities and presenting clear presentations. This evaluation results disclosed areas of knowledge and skills that English language lecturers should consider for further enhancement. If taken seriously, it can lead to overall quality improvement of the English language lecturer's teaching performance.

This finding also served to benefit managing directors by disclosing future training needs of English language lecturers. According to Nakpodia (2011), evaluation is an information gathering process where the information obtained can be used for the purpose of aiding decision makers. Managing directors, being the main decision makers can use the information gathered through the evaluation process to help them in their decision making pertaining to the existing or planned continuous professional development (CPD) courses for the teaching staff. Hence, based on the findings of the study, suitable and relevant CPD courses can be designed, focusing on areas where ratings of teaching performance were relatively lower.

Students are the actual recipients of the teaching and learning process and thus, are in a better position to assess lecturers' teaching performance. However, it is important to note that although using student evaluation is considered as the best approach when evaluating lecturers (Nakpodia, 2011) there are several pitfalls to this type of evaluation. Doubts have been raised over the validity and reliability of student ratings of teaching performance. For instance, Okoro (1991) reported that students sometimes fill in what they think the teacher would like rather than how they feel about them. Okoro (1991) also reported that some teachers treated the students leniently in order to obtain favourable ratings from them. This is commonly known as Dr Fox Effect (Merritt, 2008). This effect can take place when a lecturer can entice favourable evaluation though his lecture may have little or no substance or content. Instead of increasing learning, the lecture was filled with lively non-verbal behaviours such as lively expressions, warm gestures, good appearance and varied vocal tones to engage student interest in learning. According to Merritt (2008), lecturers who used more of such non-verbal mannerisms in classrooms tend to be given higher student ratings than those who did not. According to Marsh (1988), there are also several other factors that can influence the validity of student ratings. For instance, students tend to give higher ratings if they have prior subject interest where courses taken are aligned to their interest or if they have knowledge that the raters are not anonymous. Hence, to what extent student ratings of lecturers are valid and reliable is still a matter of controversy. Nevertheless, students being the actual recipients of teaching and learning, should be in a better position to evaluate lecturers' performance. The information they provide should generally be a good indicator of teaching performance which can help to increase personal improvements and educational standards.

The results of the study have added to the existing literature related to English language lecturers' teaching performance in this institute. Further research using a bigger sample should be conducted to make findings more conclusive. It would be interesting for future researchers to also investigate English language lecturers' teaching performance that goes beyond academic responsibilities in the classroom, such as research publications and participation in academic conferences, workshops and seminars. Such involvements have been proven to increase lecturers' teaching performance in the classroom. Evaluations of English language lecturers performed by peers, heads of department and managing directors could also be investigated in future studies.

Note:

A major part of this article was taken from an article written by the same authors on the overall students' evaluation of lecturers for 2010 that has been published in the proceedings of the 2nd

International Higher Education Teaching and Learning Conference 2013. The present article focuses on students' evaluation of English language lecturers for 2013.

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