

**EXAMINING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF  
AN EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE  
TEACHER THROUGH A CONSTRUCTIVIST  
APPROACH<sup>1</sup>**

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**Abstract**

The concept of effective language teacher has become among the most controversial topics because of the interpretational variations of the word "effective" with respect to particular contexts as well as scholars. It used to be acknowledged as simply ensuring learners' achievement or as having a good command of the target language. However, Çelik, Arkan, and Caner (2013) suggest that students now hold different perceptions and expectations with respect to the characteristics of an effective foreign language teacher. Based on this assumption, the researcher aims to examine the concept of effective language teacher by exploring the personal theories of the participants selected from her own teaching context in this study. The participants are two classmates at two extremes in terms of their achievement, participation, and attendance to classes on effective English language teacher. Data have been collected through Repertory Grid Technique (Rep-Grid) and with a follow-up interview in order to clarify the subjects' perceptions. Personal theories of the subjects demonstrate that the successful student characterizes an effective English teacher as someone having predominantly pedagogical content knowledge whereas the unsuccessful student is more concerned with classroom behavior of teachers.

**Key words:** *Personal construct psychology, Rep-grid.*

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades there has been a tendency to question the effectiveness of teacher, learner, supervisor, mentor and lesson in teacher education programs. It is hardly a coincidence that its timing corresponds to the emergence of Constructive and Cognitive approaches where the efficacy of all involving parties -once seen as a taboo-started to be questioned. In line with the shift, the concept of effective teacher has become among the most controversial topics because of the interpretational variations of the word “*effective*” with respect to particular contexts as well as scholars. Most researchers have attempted to formulate one-size-fits-all definitions, which in turn results in generalizing the situations. In most of the former studies drawing a holistic picture of teaching, for example, being an effective teacher used to be acknowledged as simply ensuring learners’ achievement or as having a good command of class. To illustrate, Lupascu, Pănișoară, and Pănișoară (2014) state that “an effective teacher is one who does things right” (p. 535). Nonetheless, along with the effect of bottom-up process introduced with the aforementioned theories, teachers’ characteristics have gained crucial importance in understanding and lessening the problems and difficulties hindering students’ long lasting learning process (Şaşan,2002; Dinçer, Göksu, Takkaç, & Yazıcı, 2013). In this sense, Arıkan, Taşer, and Saraç-Süzer (2008) also signify that:

In order to keep the continuity in attaining a high quality teaching and learning atmosphere, it is necessary to maintain a workforce of effective teachers who create positive learning spaces that are conducive to learning. Among many factors which help creating this positive atmosphere, the quality of the teacher is among the most important. (p. 43)

Anderson (cited in Lupascu et al., 2014; 2009) portrays three key features of an effective teacher as *ability*, *personality*, and *knowledge* within this new understanding. However, Richards (1990) distinguishes the effective language teaching from other subjects in that the former not only encompasses overall principles for effective teaching but there is also a specification of significant dynamics in language teaching. Similarly, according to Borg (2006), language teacher effectiveness needs to be handled independently from teacher effectiveness in general. Though not proven scientifically, he rationalizes this with five distinguishing factors (Borg, 2006):

- a. The nature of the subject matter itself
- b. The interaction pattern during instruction
- c. Its challenging nature for teachers
- d. Isolation from other subject teachers
- e. The need for external support

In the last few decades the explosion of language teaching has borne the demand for effective language teachers and for their training (Wallace, 1991). In order to serve this purpose, the content of the curriculum in second language teacher education programs around the world has been designed to be commonly composed of “a knowledge base, drawn from linguistics and language learning theory, and a practical component, based on language teaching methodology and opportunity for practice teaching” (Richards, 1990, p. 3). Even if this framework has universally been acknowledged, “teachers and students hold different perceptions and expectations with respect to the characteristics of an effective foreign language teacher” (Çelik, Arıkan, & Caner, 2013, p. 288). In this

sense, the debate over what makes a language teacher more effective or what characteristics are superior to others seems to drag on.

### **1.1. Main Characteristics of Effective English Language Teacher**

The literature in this domain offers a wide variety of classification regarding or regardless of the subject matter. To illustrate, Minor, Onwuegbuzie, Witcher, and James (2002) put forth the notion of effective teachers on the basis of cognitive skills and caring. As for Dinçer et al. (2013), a more comprehensive framework of the main characteristics of effective English language teachers is as *socio-affective skills*, *pedagogical knowledge*, *subject-matter knowledge*, and *personality characteristics*. On the other hand, in Arıkan, Taşer, and Saraç-Süzer's study (2008), the classification is divided into three parts, namely *pedagogical skills*, *personal qualities*, and *professional qualities*. Depending on the former studies and research on this particular issue, three main characteristics of effective English language teachers are discussed below:

#### ***Pedagogical Content Knowledge***

Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) is a term coined by Shulman (1987) in order to define simply the integration of content knowledge of teachers with their pedagogical knowledge. Shulman (1987) defines PCK as "the blending of content and pedagogy into an understanding of how particular topics, problems, or issues are organized, represented, and adapted to the diverse interests and abilities of learners, and presented for instruction" (p. 8). Similarly, Saraç-Süzer (2007) draws the framework of PCK as:

what teachers gain in terms of content and pedagogical knowledge before starting to practice the profession. Later, practitioners accumulate practical knowledge and construct a more stiff body of beliefs on teaching and learning which start to flourish even before the professional life, and this knowledge contributes to teachers' PCK again. (p. 30)

Taking different researchers' similar definitions into account, the scope of teachers' PCK can be outlined as having the knowledge of teaching strategies, student thinking, cognitive demands of task, resources, curriculum, and subject matter.

#### ***Personality traits***

Most of the former studies prove that teachers' personality has an impact on students' achievement (see Arıkan et al., 2008; Rubio, 2009; Dinçer et al., 2013). In the context of teaching and learning, students seek for some essential personality traits such as being fair, objective, friendly, warm, caring, thoughtful, humorous, enthusiastic, open-minded, tolerant, etc. "Students perceptions of observed teacher qualities may not always give an accurate description of their real personality, but they will still give a reasonably accurate description of teacher effectiveness" (Arıkan et al., 2008, p. 44).

#### ***Classroom Behavior***

Unlike the common sense, effective classroom behavior is far beyond simply being authoritarian. Instead, it refers to preparing the desirable learning environment free from threatening elements as well as the ability to manage all the dynamics of the class. Indeed, practical examples from earlier research have confirmed that "good classroom

management and organization, and a good lesson plan also minimize the likelihood of misbehavior” (Rubio, 2009, p. 38), which will in turn foster the optimal learning environment.

### 1.2. Personal Construct Psychology (PCP) and Repertory Grid Technique

In his theory of PCP, Kelly (2003) suggests that “a person’s processes are psychologically channelized by the ways in which he anticipates events” (p. 7). He further proposes (cited in Roberts, 1998) that:

Each person develops a unique repertoire of constructs based on his/her experience of the world and assumes that the events we face today are subject to as great a variety of constructions as our wits will enable us to contrive. (p. 29)

RepGrid technique is based on PCP (Kelly, 1955), “a constructivist theory that states that people experience, organize, and describe their environment in terms of cognitive personal constructs that can be transformed into bipolar verbal labels—labels such as *helpful-hurtful, emotional-analytical, or trustworthy-unreliable*” (Curtis et al., 2008, p. 38). There are three main components, namely *elements, constructs, and links* in a Rep-Grid. Elements refer to the main units to be examined whereas constructs reflect the subjects’ conceptualization of the elements. Links, as the name suggests, indicates the relation of ratings and rankings between the elements and constructs.

This study aims to compare two distinguished students’ personal theories on effective English language teacher by means of Rep-Grid technique based on the view that “students’ opinions of effective teachers will give researchers and practitioners some insight into the making of an effective foreign language teacher” (Arikan et al., 2008, p. 44).

### Research Questions

1. How do personal theories of a successful student on an effective English language teacher differ from those of an *unsuccessful* student?
2. What characteristics of an English language teacher are of first priority for the students at two extremes?

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

There are two participants who are selected by the researcher on a basis of purposive sampling in which the researchers “use their judgment to select a sample that they believe, based on prior information, will provide the data they need” (Fraenkel, Wallen & Hyun, 2012, p. 100). Based on this view, the researcher selected two students at two extremes from her own teaching context after a long period of observation. Both students are currently studying at the Department of International Trade and Logistics in Mersin University. They are both male and 25 years old. Throughout this study, the researcher addresses both students with their pseudonyms, Kaya and Mert. The participants have diverse characteristics as a student. Kaya is a student with highly successful performance in English lessons together with a full attendance to the classes. He is also very enthusiastic, collaborative, and brilliant. On the contrary, Mert has rather low achievement as well as his limited attendance to English lessons. When he is present in the class, he seems to be uninterested, demotivated, and unprepared.

**2.2. Instrumentation**

In order to find out how foreign language learners perceive the qualities of an effective English language teacher, the researcher benefited from the *Repertory Grid Technique* (Rep-Grid) basically used in clinical psychology. Based on this purpose, a Rep-Grid form (*adapted from İlin, 2005*) consisting of 1-5 scale was applied to the students in order to elicit the constructs and elements regarding their perceptions of an effective English language teacher (Appendix 1). Table 1 shows the elements and their explanations supplied in the grid. The adapted version consists of four elements so that the grid can serve for the purpose of this study. In the original version, there were a total of eleven elements consisting of three *effective*, three *typical*, three *ineffective*, one *self*, and one *ideal* elements. However, considering the scope of the present study, it was approved to be composed of one sample of each teacher as well as the ideal. Since the subjects were neither teachers nor prospective teachers, the element *self* was removed from the grid.

**Table 1. The Elements and Their Explanations for the Subjects**

<b>Number</b>	<b>Elements</b>	<b>Explanations</b>
<b>1</b>	E1	Effective English Language Teacher
<b>2</b>	T1	Typical English Language Teacher
<b>3</b>	I1	Ineffective English Language Teacher
<b>4</b>	Ideal	Ideal English Language Teacher

Upon the elicitation of personal theories of both students, a follow-up interview was conducted depending on the constructs they had supplied. The interview was in an emergent style rather than structured where each student was required to give further explanation about the answers. The interviews lasted for about 20 minutes in total with both subjects. They were recorded and transcribed afterwards.

**2.3.Data Collection Procedure**

Data has been collected from both subjects simultaneously. To initiate the process, they were invited to the researcher's office. Because of the unfamiliarity of Rep-Grid technique to the subjects, the researcher explained them how to handle with the grid. Then, the researcher asked the subjects to supply as many constructs as they could about the qualities of an effective language teacher. When they completed writing their constructs, the subjects were also asked to rank five constructs that they thought most important for the qualities of an effective English language teacher. The procedure lasted for about one and half hour in total.

**2.4.Data Analysis**

The RepGrid2 (1993) computer program was developed by the Centre for Person-Computer Studies in Canada. It is a computer-based tool providing an integrated set of tools for elicitation and analysis of elements and constructs in a given domain. Data gathered from the present study were computed in Rep-Grid2 program. Each grid data collected from both participants was analyzed using the FOCUS grid analysis program separately in which the participants' constructs and elements are shown in hierarchical clusters. The FOCUS analysis of both grids presented the match levels between the constructs and elements elicited from the participants. The cut-off point was 80%, which is an accepted significance level in repertory grid research to identify the structure of the participants' personal constructs (Rep Grid 2 Manual, 1993).

3. FINDINGS AND RESULTS

Upon the elicitation of students' constructs via rep-grid technique, the data were computed. The formation of constructs along with their associations was attained.

The Content and the Structure of KAYA's Personal Theories on Effective English Language Teacher

Kaya's grid data consists of 17 constructs and 4 elements. Kaya's Focused grid shown in Figure 1 illustrates the construct and element trees drawn at 80% cut off point.

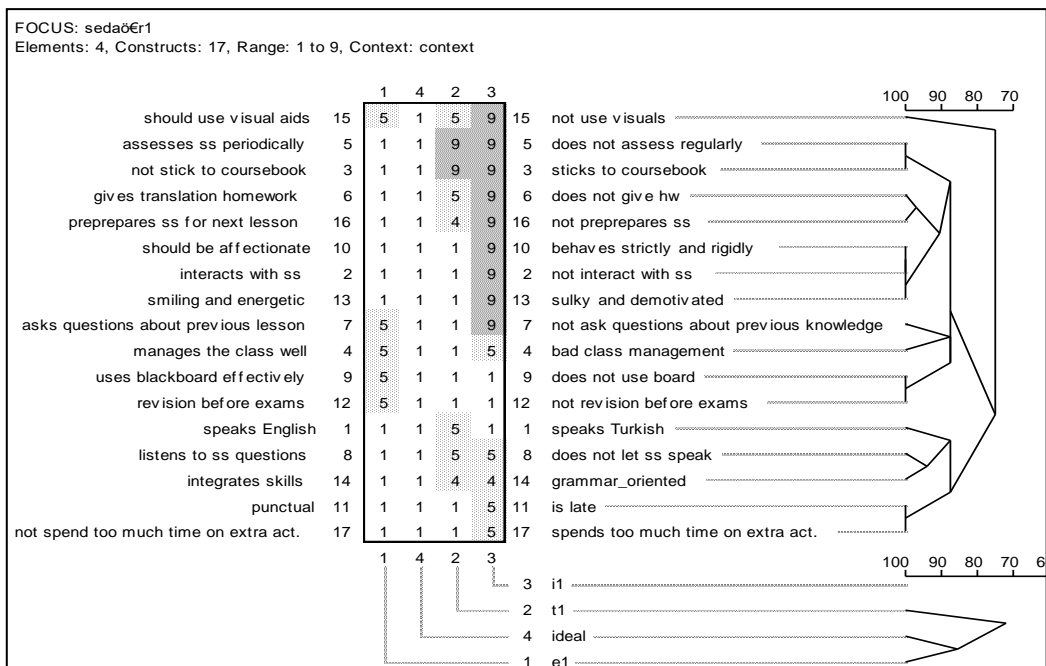


Figure 1: Kaya's Focused Grid

Construct links

In the focus analysis of the grid, there appears to be two clusters. In the first cluster, we see that (C5) *assessing students periodically* which holds the highest rank in the order of priority perfectly matches with (C3) *not sticking to coursebook*. This 100% match level shows that Kaya strongly believes that an effective English language teacher who assesses her students regularly does not stick to coursebook. Also, (C6) *giving translation homework* and (C16) *preparing students for next lesson* are tightly matched at 98% match level. In addition, (C10) *being affectionate* is associated with (C2) *interacting with students* and (C13) *smiling and energetic* with another perfect match level, 100%. It can be inferred that these characteristics, namely being affectionate, smiling, and energetic constitute his mindset in the personality traits of an effective English language teacher. These constructs (C10), (C2) and (C13) coincide with (C6) and (C16) at 92% match level. (C9) *using board effectively* and his second most important construct in the grid (C12) *revision before exams* form another perfect match with 100%. This shows Kaya's strong belief on the close relationship between using blackboard effectively and revision before exams.

In the second cluster, (C8) *listening to students' questions* is associated with (C14) *integrating skills* at 95 % match level. These constructs coincide with (C1) *speaking English* at 90% match level as well. In addition, (C11) *being punctual* and (C17) *not spending too much time on extra activities* are associated with each other at 100% match level in his grid. Regarding (C17), Kaya rationalizes his view in the follow-up interview as follows:

*"I think the teacher should use the time effectively. There may be some extracurricular activities or games. However, I mean, an effective teacher should leave limited time for them and focus on the lesson instead."*

Finally, (C8), (C14), and (C1) are linked with these two abovementioned constructs at 90% match level. All these constructs are also loosely matched with the first cluster.

**Element Links**

Rep-Grid analysis of subjects also revealed how they viewed English language teachers they imagined throughout the elicitation process. Some striking results have emerged when the element links of Kaya are investigated. Among four elements, typical teacher, ideal teacher, and effective teacher form a rather loose cluster at 75% match level. However, within this cluster, E1 and ideal teacher elements are associated with 90% match level. It is found that I1 is a completely isolated element which indicates that Kaya conceptualizes the qualities of effective English language teacher with those of E1. On the other hand, he has some hesitations about T1 as a typical effective English language teacher since it demonstrates a rather loose match with ideal and E1, yet in the same cluster.

**The Content and the Structure of MERT's Personal Theories on Effective English Language Teacher**

Mert's grid data consists of 14 constructs and 4 elements. Mert's Focused grid shown in Figure 2 indicates the construct and element trees drawn at 80% cut off point.

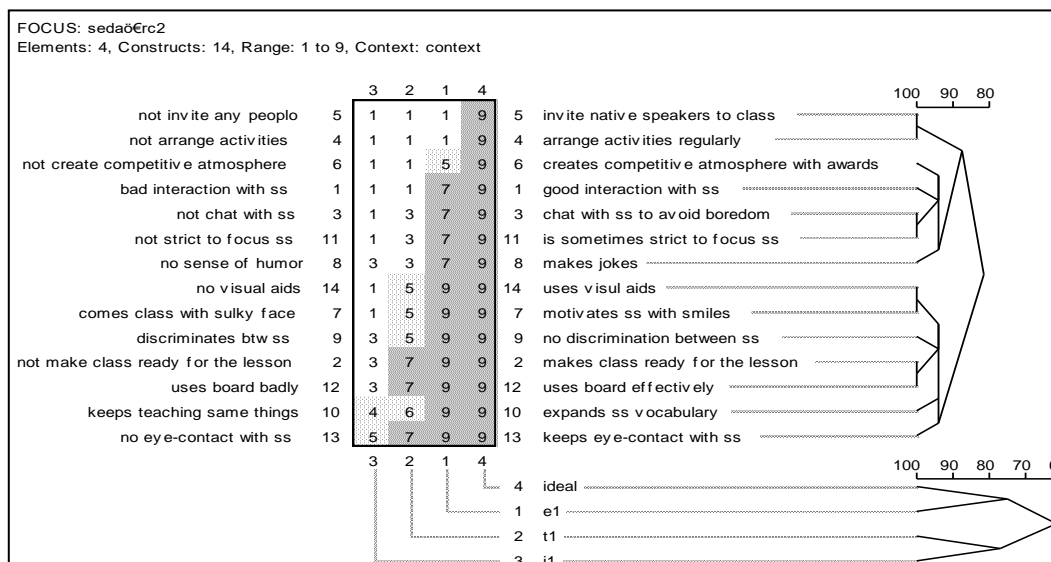


Figure 2. Mert's Focused Grid

### **Construct Links**

The focus analysis (Fig. 2) of Mert demonstrates that there are two clusters and one pair in his grid. In the first cluster, it is seen that the fourth of the five high priority constructs in his grid (C3) *chatting with students to avoid boredom*, and (C11) *being sometimes strict to focus students* are found to be associated in a perfect match, 100%. This means that Mert strongly believes that an effective English language teacher who chats with students to avoid boredom is also strict enough to focus the students. These constructs also associate with (C1) *having a good interaction with students* at a 95% match level. Regarding construct 11, when the researcher asked further explanations, Mert made comments as follows:

*"...You know all the students. If a teacher behaves them like a friend, they always benefit from this and they start to ignore the lesson and the teacher. In my opinion, a teacher has to balance her behavior. She should be strict and angry if needed. Neither very strict nor very tolerant... In the middle."*

On the other hand, these constructs C3, C11, and C1 appear to coincide with super-ordinate constructs (C6) *create competitive atmosphere with awards* and (C8) *making jokes* at 95 % match level. Such a tight match among Mert's constructs implies that he has some strong beliefs about the classroom behavior of an effective English language teacher.

In the analysis of the second cluster, we encounter perfectly matched constructs, which signals the certainty of Mert's mind about the qualities of the teacher. (C14) *using visual aids* and the first of the five high priority constructs of the grid (C7) *motivating students with smiles* is associated with 100% match level. Another perfect match is seen between (C2) *making class ready for the lesson* and (C12) *using board effectively*

In the pair, (C5) *inviting native speaker to the class* and (C4) *arranging activities regularly* demonstrate a perfect coherence with a 100% match level. Mert clarifies (C4) in the follow-up session:

*"..What I mean is, for example, lessons should not be limited into coursebooks. The teacher may organize cinema days. We can watch or go to movies once a month. I bet everyone will like English lessons then. I mean instead of learning English in a traditional way, the teacher should diversify it "*

Although (C10) *expanding students' vocabulary* and (C13) *keeping eye-contact with students* appear to be separated from the other constructs in the second cluster, in fact all of them associate with one another at 92% match level within the same cluster. It might be speculated that although Mert believes that an effective English teacher should expand students' vocabulary, he cannot associate this specific construct with any of the other constructs.

### **Element Links**

In the analysis of element links, we see that all four elements form a cluster at 65 % match level. Such a low match demonstrates his misconceptualization of the effective English language teacher in his mind. Within the cluster, there are two pairs. Ideal and E1 form a pair at 80% match level. In addition, T1 and I1 coincide at 80 % match level as



well. According to this evaluation, Mert has unclear definition in his mind about the qualities of an each teacher, namely effective, typical, ineffective, and ideal.

*RQ1: How do personal theories of a successful student on an effective English language teacher differ from those of an unsuccessful student?*

Considering the main characteristics of effective English language teacher, Table 2 gives the analysis of each student's constructs with respect to those categories. The categorization of Kaya's constructs clearly displays that 11 out of 17 (64,7 %) constructs fall into the pedagogical content knowledge category while only 3 of them (17,6%) belong to personality traits. The fact that a great majority of his constructs are accumulated in PCK reveals how he perceives to be an effective English language teacher. On the other hand, out of 14 constructs of Mert, there seems to be an equal distribution among three categorizations. Five (35,7 %) out of 14 constructs are in PCK while 4 (28,5%) of them fall into the category of personality traits. The rest 5 (35,7 %) constructs are attached to the classroom behavior category.

*RQ2: What characteristics of an English language teacher are of first priority for the students at two extremes?*

To expand the analysis, a deeper and more elaborate look into the constructs helps gain better understanding in terms of subjects' personal theories. Table 3 displays the five highest priority constructs in the rank order comparatively.

**Table 3. Comparison of the constructs prioritized by the subjects**

<b>Rank Order</b> (from highest)	<b>KAYA</b>	<b>MERT</b>
<b>1</b>	assessing students periodically	motivating students with smiles
<b>2</b>	revision before exams	arranging extracurricular activities
<b>3</b>	using visual aids	no discrimination between students
<b>4</b>	asking questions about previous lessons	chatting with students to avoid boredom
<b>5</b>	manages the class well	expands students vocabulary

As seen clearly from Table 3, out of 17 constructs Kaya has prioritized the ones related to PCK mostly. The first four of his prioritized constructs belong to PCK while the construct in the fifth order is related to classroom behavior. On the other hand, in the ranking of the most important characteristics of an effective English language teacher, Mert has prioritized two personality traits (1 and 3), two classroom behaviors (2 and 4), and one PCK constructs (5).

**4. DISCUSSION**

Both participants' diverse personal theories on effective English language teacher provide substantial implications for the researcher in a narrower scope and teachers and teacher education programs in general. First of all, it has been demonstrated that the conceptualization of the successful and *unsuccessful* students differ considerably. As in the case of Kaya, a successful student portrays an English language teacher mostly having sound PCK by leaving less space to other characteristics. It is evident that the personality traits and classroom behavior of a teacher do not make as much difference as PCK for such a student. If the content of his constructs are scrutinized, one can realize how his previous learning experiences affect his conceptualization. To illustrate, the message in his constructs of C5, C12, C16, and C17 (three of which are also his prioritized constructs) dates back to Turkish educational system and carries the traces of

the assessment and testing types he has been exposed to. A student who has accustomed to such a system is likely to picture an effective English teacher with respect to PCK solely rather than other characteristics. On the other hand, from the unsuccessful student's point of view, there is a combination of all three types of characteristics; however, regarding the content of his constructs, one can infer that he has yet to conceptualize the notion of an effective English language teacher in his mind since it is hardly possible to attribute his constructs to language teachers only. Thus, judging by these results, the teacher-as-researcher has gained feedback about her strengths and weaknesses in her instruction indirectly. Moreover, another role of the study can be thought as consciousness-raising since the teacher has had the opportunity to gain insight towards students' preferences and priorities in language learning process, which will lead the teacher to take future actions accordingly.

### 5. CONCLUSION

This study has sought for the concept of effective English language teacher in the light of Personal Construct Psychology through the comparison of two diverse perspectives in an EFL context. In this sense, the current study differs from former studies addressing the same issue since its methodology is based on the Constructivist approach. It has helped the researcher reveal her students' priorities and expectations from their teachers as well as diverse conceptualizations of effectiveness based on their prior experiences. In this sense, the current study is likely to contribute to the related body of research in that it provides an opportunity for language teachers to see themselves from their students' perspectives.

**Table 2. The Distribution of Students' Constructs with respect to Main Characteristics of an Effective English Teacher**

Subjects	Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK)	Personality Traits	Classroom behavior
<b>KAYA</b>	C1 speaks English C3 not sticking to coursebooks C5* assessing students periodically C6 giving translation homework C7* asking questions about previous lesson C9 uses blackboard effectively C12* revision before exams C14 integrates skills C15* should use visual aids C16 prepares students for the next lesson C17 not spending too much time on extra activities	C10 being affectionate C11 punctual C13 smiling and energetic	C2 interacts with students C4* managing class well C8 listening to students questions
<b>17 in total</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>MERT</b>	C2 makes class ready for the lesson C5 invites native speakers to the class C10* expands students' vocabulary C12 uses board effectively C14 uses visual aids	C7* motivating students with smiles C8 makes jokes C11 being strict sometimes C9* no discrimination	C1 good interaction with students C3* chat with students to avoid boredom C4* arranges activities regularly C6 creates competitive atmosphere with rewards C13 keeps eye contact with students
<b>14 in total</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>

*\*Items with asterisks are subjects' prioritized constructs.*

Along with the possible contributions, this study has some limitations. First of all, the population of the study does not allow for the generalization of the results. Since the results are limited to the personal theories of two participants thought to be the representatives, the current study can be considered as context-specific. In order to be able to reach a generalization and to see the overview of the issue, further research over a larger population is needed. Secondly, the instruments used in the study could have been diversified in order to triangulate the data gathered if the study had been extended over a longer period of time. Apart from them, a comparative and longitudinal study meticulously-designed to examine both students' and teachers' conceptualization and expectations about effective English language teacher is likely to provide rich and sound data that can be benefited in teacher education programs in the long run.

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**APPENDIX 1**  
Participants

Class      Date      Category      No.

Construct No	Triads	Emergent Constructs (Similarities)	Rating Scale				Implicit Constructs (Contrasts)
			E1	T1	I1	Ideal	
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							
8							
9							
10							
11							
12							
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17							
18							
19							
20							

Rank Order

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.