

# English Teachers' Perception of the Importance of Understanding Teachers' Roles to Improve Teacher-Students Relationship

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## Abstract

Teachers' knowledge and understanding of their roles as teachers are essential as a part of their professional identity. The purpose of this study was to explore English language teachers' perception of the importance of understanding teachers' roles and how it could make them aware of building positive relationships with their students. The qualitative method was used to conduct the investigation. The data was gathered through a simple online survey and a focus group discussion. This survey discovered that the majority of teachers were aware of their roles not only as teachers but also as educators, class managers, sources of knowledge, mentors, mediators, facilitators, role models, supervisors, and assessors. Some respondents also revealed that in some conditions their roles must go beyond the class and touch students' life. All teachers agreed that their understanding of teachers' roles was very important and had an impact on their teaching and their relationship with their students. They also expressed that they expected a comfortable and supportive teacher-student relationship and mutual respect.

**Keywords:** teachers' perception, teachers' roles, teacher-students relationship

## Introduction

Teaching and learning are social activities that involve an emotional connection and interaction between teacher and students. This is a mutually beneficial interaction where the teacher leads students to meet their learning goals. Teachers' and students' interaction is influenced by the quality of the relationship between them. While the quality of this relationship is influenced by teachers' perception of their roles and students' responses to the teachers' figures and the learning interaction that has occurred.

*Teachers' roles* refer to "what teachers do in classrooms" and *teachers' identities* refer to "the ways that teachers think about themselves and their classroom roles" (Keiler, 2018, p.3). A teacher's identity is reflected in one's beliefs about teaching and becoming a teacher; it is always changing based on his professional teaching experience (Grier & Johnston, 2009, p.59). Cohen (2008, p.80) states that a teacher's identity is the core value and beliefs that guide and influence the teachers in their action, commitment, and teaching practice in and out of the classroom. These values and beliefs shape teachers' understanding, the way they see themselves as teachers, their attitudes, and their pedagogical choices.

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Students naturally are classroom observers; they could feel and react to any kind of learning situation. The teacher-student relationship plays a significant role to create a supportive and conducive classroom atmosphere and contributes to students' attitudes toward schools. A positive learning atmosphere is needed since classroom conditions and surroundings could either improve or depress students' academic performance which then results in their learning achievements (Fan, 2012).

The way teachers behave in the classroom was responded to and reflected either positively or negatively by students (Klein, 1991). When the teachers' behavior was positive, the students responded positively too; they smiled and looked at the teachers attentively. Whereas when the teachers showed negative behavior, students' behavior was negative too; their responses were like talking to their classmates, frowning, looking at the clock, or looking out the windows.

There have been many studies conducted to investigate the teachers' roles, teachers' tasks, and teacher-students' relationships, but it is rarely found research that studies English teachers' perception of the importance of understanding teachers' roles to improve teacher-student relationships. Based on the background and the concepts proposed above, this study is aimed to answer these questions:

1. What are English teachers' perceptions of the importance of understanding teachers' roles in the EFL context?
2. How could this understanding and knowledge affect their teaching and relationship with students?

This study is expected to be useful for English teachers, stakeholders, and other future researchers. For English teachers, it can be a reflection of their teaching practice and to build their self-awareness of the importance of understanding their roles as language teachers. For stakeholders, it is hoped that the information in this research would provide beneficial knowledge for designing learning policy. Last but not least, for other future researchers, it is expected to give comprehensive information for the ones who are interested to conduct the study which relates to this issue.

## Literature Review

Teaching is defined as a series of teacher-directed instructional activities that are carried out using specific teaching techniques that are appropriate for the subject matter being studied (Harmer, 2007). Each teacher has their techniques of instruction, and some are undoubtedly better suited to particular students and learning environments than others. Besides being *facilitators*, a teacher can play at least five different roles which are *controller*, *resource*, *prompter*, *participant*, and *tutor* (Harmer, 2007). Being *facilitators* does not mean that students can do whatever they want; teachers still be the ones who are responsible to carry out the lesson. Teachers might *control* the class, but they also have to provide more opportunities for students to practice their language skills.

In the process of practicing the language and delivering the ideas, students might have some problems with the vocabulary, structure, or utterance. In that situation, teachers have to guide and play their big roles as the most trusted *sources* of knowledge by answering their questions or recommending some good learning sources like books or websites. Teachers must constantly learn, develop their abilities, and broaden their knowledge to meet this

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demand. As *prompters*, teachers should be initiators who always encourage their students to be active and guide them in their learning process. In the classroom activities, sometimes the teacher must *participate* and contribute to role-plays or discussions and provide feedback for the betterment of students' work. Last, as a *tutor*, teachers must create a balance between guiding students' learning and letting them explore the language. Considering all of these roles, teachers could be called an *actor* who should respond correctly to every single situation and students' behavior.

According to Harmer (2007), teachers' main task in teaching is organizing students and their learning activities. It started by engaging and encouraging students to be ready for the class, continued by demonstrating what students need to accomplish, guided them in the process, and ended by providing feedback, evaluation, and reflection. Teachers and students need to cooperate and build a good relationship in order to achieve the learning objectives. Positive interaction with the teacher can improve students' confidence, willingness, and openness toward the learning problems that they should overcome. There are several ways for teachers to build good relationships with their students: 1) recognizing students by remembering their names and characters, 2) listening and appreciating students' ideas, 3) respecting and accepting students' differences, 4) treating all students equally.

As a learning media, teachers play an important role as language models who will provide comprehensive input and use mime and gesture to help students learn the language. Mime and gesture are very crucial in communication since they might indicate and represent politeness and respect to others. Being a model means that teachers should be able to give examples of certain learning activities such as pronouncing difficult words, having conversations, reading poetry or poem, presenting the works, etc. In the process of acquiring knowledge and skills, teachers' comprehensive input and guidance will be very helpful for students.

English teachers nowadays might come from native or non-native-speaker teachers. Native speakers obviously can provide better pronunciation and language use, and share more authentic information on cross-culture understanding. However, they might not understand the struggles faced by foreign students and cannot compare the context of the target language with students' first language where in the worst condition, it might create miscommunication or misperception when using the language. In sum, native and non-native-speaker teachers have their strengths and weaknesses. Moreover, the success of a student's learning is not determined by whether the teacher is native or not, but is more influenced by the quality of the teacher and his teaching.

Teachers' personalities and levels of readiness are additional aspects that are worth discussing. Different teachers with different characters will present different teaching styles. However, successful learning is not only determined by personality but also by teachers' preparation before the class and their willingness to give the best teaching. To maintain teacher and students' relationship, teachers can follow these tips: 1) show interest in students, 2) provide feedback and guidance, 3) monitor students' progress, 4) appreciate, respect, and value students' feelings and ideas, 5) laugh with them and not at them, 6) work with students as a team, 7) for both teachers and students, stay curious and never stop learning.

According to Koca (2016), students who are motivated and have a strong will can succeed in their academic goals. Having a good relationship with the teachers and a supportive classroom environment will help students to get motivated and be better learners. Scales et. al., (2020) and Mustary (2020) found out that the teacher-students relationship brought a

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positive impact on education; students that could interact with their teachers usually perform better and get better scores in the class. There are different opinions regarding which learning mode offers more teacher-student relationships, online or offline learning. Online learning might offer flexibility, but offline learning is considered more meaningful. In the end, it depends on the teacher; teachers still can build their relationships with students through online or offline communication. However, in this digital era, teachers and students can maximize the utilization of social media and communication platforms to maintain relationships virtually or in person.

## Method

This study employed a qualitative method. Merriam (2009, p.23) mentions that a qualitative method is suitable for the research questions that focus on people's interpretations of their experiences, how they see and construct their worlds, and the meaning they make to the experiences. A case study that promotes *descriptive explanatory* information could describe and explain the patterns and the relationships related to the phenomena (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). A simple online survey using Google form was used to collect the data. It was then followed by a small focus group discussion. The survey asked four questions: 1) What are teachers' roles in teaching English in the classroom? 2) How important is it for the teacher to understand his or her role? 3) What kind of relationship should be established between teacher and student? and 4) Does understanding the teachers' roles have an impact on the way teachers teach and build a relationship with students?

To make the respondents feel more comfortable in answering the questions, this survey was anonymous and in the form of open-ended questions. This survey was distributed to English teachers in several schools and private educational institutions in Banjarmasin. The questions asked in the questionnaires were designed and developed based on the research questions. Some of the researcher's colleagues checked and reviewed the questionnaires before they were delivered to make sure that each question was suitable and clear (Patten, 2017).

The first question was related to the respondents' ideas, knowledge, or perspectives about their roles as teachers in general. The second question wanted to see teachers' views on whether knowing the teachers' roles was important to them or not and then it also wanted to know how important that knowledge was. The third one tried to explore the teachers' opinions on what kind of relationship should be built between teachers and students. The last seek to explore the teachers' perception on whether understanding the teachers' roles had an impact on the teachers' teaching quality and how teachers-built relationships with their students.

To dig deeper information, the researcher invited the participants to a simple focus group discussion. Of the respondents who participated in this study, four participants were willing to give further of their opinions. The focus group discussion lasted for approximately one hour and was carried out a few days after the data from the survey was completely collected. The discussion was conducted in a relaxed and natural manner without losing the essence of the discussion itself. The results from the questionnaire and focus group discussion were analyzed by applying inductive content analysis (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). After the process, the data was presented in the form of a description and concluded by adding recommendations.

## **Finding and Discussion**

This section discusses the findings from the questionnaires and a focus group discussion. After distributing the questionnaires for several days, ten teachers were willing to fill out the questionnaires and four teachers volunteered to be asked further in the focus group discussion. The findings and discussion are categorized into four main parts based on the research questions. The first theme investigates the respondents' perceptions about teachers' roles; the second theme wants to see the respondents' opinions about how important understanding the teachers' roles are for them; the third theme tries to look for the description of how the teacher-students relationship should be built; then the last theme explores the teachers' thought as well as validates their agreement on whether having an understanding of the teachers' roles had an impact on the way the teachers teach and how they build relationships with students.

### *1. Teachers' Roles*

Responding to this theme, the respondents mentioned various teachers' roles in Education. In general, the respondents mentioned the teachers' roles including teachers, educators (teaching good things/moral values), class managers or organizers, sources of knowledge, mentors, role models, friends, parents, mediators, class examples, supervisors, facilitators, motivators, directors, coaches, instructors, discussion partners, assessors of learning process and outcomes, evaluators, and inspirators. These findings were also in line with the results of other studies that enriched the information related to teachers' roles in teaching practice.

In constructivist classes, Moustafa et al. (2013, p. 418-419) state that teachers' roles are encouraging and accepting students' autonomy and creating a comfortable condition for students to express themselves. This concept is in contrast to traditional teaching where class domination is on the teachers as content knowledge providers. Friere supports the notion that mentions teachers as students' discussion partners. He considers teachers as students' learning partners and not as students' disciplinarians or enforcers (Gutstein, 2007, p. 424). Basu and Barton (2010) propose that to implement democratic pedagogy, teachers can share authority with their students. Involving students in some instructional decision makings is expected to increase students' sense of responsibility toward their learning.

In a PBL learning setting, teachers do not act as class controllers and knowledge providers, but rather as coaches, facilitators, and models for students to solve their problems (Yukhymenko et al., 2014, p.102). In PjBL implementation, there are at least four teachers' roles: initiators, extenders, navigators, and reinforcers (Tamim & Grant, 2013). In general, Gordon et al. (2001, p.171) mention that as facilitators, teachers maintain students' learning focus; as mentors, they guide students in the learning process; as assessors, they are responsible to measure the challenges and provide feedback for students' improvement. In other words, teachers' roles are flexible and might change depending on what learning approach is applied in the classroom.

### *2. The Importance of Understanding the Teachers' Roles*

The survey results revealed that all respondents agreed with the notion that “the teachers need to understand their roles as teachers”. Several respondents stated their reasons to support their agreement.

“It is very important, if the teacher does not understand his role, then the learning will be mediocre, ineffective, and tend to be boring. Learning process tend to be one-way learning, teacher-cantered, and without involving students” (T5)

“It is so essential for the teacher to understand his role. A teacher who understands his role will cultivate the values of good and effective teachers within himself which then guides and directs the teacher inside or outside the school. Teachers’ roles are not only as a giver and a mentor of knowledge but also includes instilling positive characters in students. Even sometimes, teachers also have to touch on students’ personal life. Especially, if we find out that there is something that happens to their life or family.” (T6)

“It is very crucial to make teachers have the desire to carry out learning activities well” (T10)

This finding indicated that teachers need to have a full understanding and awareness of their roles as teachers. This understanding and awareness would affect their attitude, teaching methods, their relationships with students, other teachers, and surroundings, as well as how they value their roles in the classroom. Teachers’ roles give a big impact on students’ learning interests and outcomes. Teachers’ influence in the class is greater than in any other classroom setting (Bargan & Dunn, 1996).

### *3. Teacher-students Relationship*

External factors that involve interactions and relationships between teachers and students cannot be ignored because after all, a teaching and learning process is a social activity that involves two sides. In this influential and mutually beneficial friendship, there is content that needs to be taught, teachers who educate, and students who are expected to experience the changes. The quality of the existing relationship influence all learning activities and, in the end, also create a better-quality form of a teacher-student relationship.

The questionnaire results showed the respondents’ opinions regarding how the teacher-students relationship should be. It revealed that the ideal teacher-student relationship is the relationship that 1) respects and appreciates each other, 2) learns from each other, 3) is positive, 4) closes like friends or parents, but still knows the boundaries, 5) is comfortable for everyone, 6) understand each other’s abilities and needs, and 7) is harmonious. Some respondents provided their arguments regarding this issue.

“Teacher-students’ relationships should provide students with a sense of security, such as addressing them by name and asking how they are, finding out what they are up to today, giving them a space to tell stories, etc. In order for communication to continue until it enters the learning session, teachers must also respond and work together” (T3)

“If teacher-students’ relationship is like what teachers have in mind, close like mentors or second parents, it could make students do not hesitate and are afraid to ask the teacher if there is something they do not understand” (T5)

“The relationship that should exist between teachers and students should be harmonious, friendly, and flexible without forgetting the limitations of being a professional teacher. Today’s children also prefer teachers who they see as friends rather than teachers who are fierce. Understanding and adapting to the child’s environment is also important to build good relationships with children” (T6)

Based on some statements above, the researcher highlighted that *creating a sense of security* and *closeness* is important in building teacher-student relationships. This feeling would make students more open to state their ideas, try the challenge, practice the language, answer the questions, and they would not hesitate or be afraid to ask the teacher’s help when they find problems in their learning. Good teacher-student relationships make students feel safe, cared for, and free to express themselves and participate actively in the learning process (Paschal & Mkulu, 2020). In other words, a professional teacher-student relationship requires the application of the values of support and openness.

#### *4. The Impact of Understanding the Teachers’ Roles to Improve Teacher-students Relationship*

According to the research findings, all respondents expressed their agreement with this notion. Teachers’ knowledge, principles, and awareness more and less influence every decision and action they make. Understanding teachers’ roles were believed to give an impact on improving the teacher-student relationship. The following statements represented some of the points that the teacher wanted to convey.

“It is very impactful. When teachers are aware of their roles, they will not be careless in teaching and they will always maintain a good relationship with students” (T1)

“How teachers teach and build relationships with students are of course influenced by their understanding of the teacher’s roles and the concept of a good teacher. Teachers who understand their roles will always look for the right way to teach and support their children. Those teachers will always look for innovation and creation to provoke children’s understanding and creativity. This also makes teachers cultivate close and good relationships with children. Children are no longer reluctant to share their learning problems and difficulties” (T6)

The first point was teachers’ understanding of their roles influenced their teaching and relationship with students. Teachers who take their jobs seriously will take teaching seriously; they will do their best to find the best learning method that suits the needs of students and they will focus on developing close bonds with them. Another point that should be highlighted was that teachers’ understanding of their roles in the learning process shaped the way teachers teach in the class. For instance, when the teacher assumes that he is the only source of knowledge for students, he will be dominant in the learning process; he will explain everything and students will focus on listening.

On the other hand, when the teacher acts as a student's learning partner, he will allow students to participate in the learning process together. If students make errors while practicing their language skills or misinterpret the learning content, the teacher will provide feedback and appreciate all the improvement efforts they make. This idea was taken from some of the respondents' comments that revealed their concerns.

“Of course, it was very impactful. Teachers who have different understandings of their roles will design different learning activities and produce different outputs or learning outcomes” (T4)

“Very impactful, if the teacher understands his role as the most capable person in the class, then he tends to teach only by lecturing, but if he considers his role as a facilitator for students' learning, the teaching method chosen will make students active in class” (T5)

#### *Teachers' Roles and Teacher-students' Relationship in English Language Teaching*

In order to get deeper information related to teachers' perception of their roles in English class, a simple focus group discussion was conducted. The results of the questionnaire were considered too general and had not been able to touch a specific detail on the teacher's roles within the EFL context. The results of the discussion revealed several language teachers' roles including *explanation and example provider, assignment and feedback giver, corrector, class organizer, speaking partner, writing advisor, concept checker*, etc. These roles described the teachers' understanding of what the teachers should do and have done in the classroom practice so far. The researcher and teachers had a light debate about whether this was in accordance with their understanding or because the activities were the habits of their teaching ways. Some teachers admitted that it was the result of their teaching experiences, styles, and habits in the classroom. Some also said that it was what they learned from the teacher training program, and another teacher stated that her increased awareness changed some of her teaching methods in the classroom.

“I used to think that being a language teacher was the same as other teachers, explaining, giving assignments, discussing the answers, then finished. Now, I realize that being a language teacher is not easy, we do not teach *about the language*, but we teach *the language* itself. For that reason, now I often encourage my students to use English in class, no matter how bad their performance is. It is not easy, but that's how they learn and that's how the language class should be. Starting from the teacher itself who should use English in the class. So, language teachers must be able to become students' speaking partners and writing supervisors” (T1)

Regarding the teacher-students' relationship, all teachers acknowledged that this relationship was important to encourage students in the learning process. Considering that English is a foreign language, not all students like it, and not all students find it easy, teachers need to use a persuasive approach. Encouraging students to use English without judging their mistakes and correcting them step by step are several things that can be done, so then students would not feel pressured and afraid to try.

It was in line with Fan (2012, p.483) who states “teacher-students interpersonal relationship significantly gives impact on students' learning outcomes”. Teachers who are



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skillful in applying their interpersonal skills in delivering the lesson and building friendships with their students tend to be able to create positive feelings in the learning process. Their sensitiveness to students' needs and problems socially and emotionally would tend to invite students' openness and increase their willingness to learn. On the other hand, irritable, sarcastic, emotional, and judgmental teachers are likely to scare students.

## Conclusion

This study has shown some significant points. First, in general, teachers have various roles including teaching, educating, managing or organizing learning activities, becoming one of the sources of knowledge for students, mentoring, being role models inside and outside the class, being friends and the second parents for students, becoming mediators, giving class examples, being supervisors, facilitating students during the class, giving motivation, directing students to achieve learning goals, coaching, giving instruction, becoming discussion partners, assessing the learning process and outcomes, evaluating, and inspiring students for goodness. It was in line with the study from Naibaho (2019, p. 206) who mentioned that successful English language teachers with a student-centered learning approach implement their roles as "a participant, a tutor, a resource, a prompter, an observer, an organizer, a performer, an assessor, a controller and as teaching aid".

This study also specifically revealed several teachers' roles in English language teaching, which included giving explanations and examples of the terms, tenses, or vocabulary that students had not understood, assigning tasks and providing feedback on students' work, correcting students' mistakes and showing the correct ones, organizing classroom learning activities, serving as students' speaking partners, assisting students with their writing, and ensuring the accuracy of their understanding by asking questions and discussing with them.

Teachers have a great responsibility for the development of student learning and the formation of their character. Being a good teacher starts from the characters and the personality of the teacher itself; the Indonesian philosophy which mentions that teacher is "*digugu dan ditiru*" means that the teacher is a figure who can be a role model for his students. Harmer (1998) mentions that teachers should present themselves in the best way since students will see them as role models; a good teacher can absorb unexpected things and use them for the good of the students.

The quality of the connection between teachers and students strongly influences students learning success. Students who have a close and supportive relationship with teachers achieve better learning outcomes than those who have a conflicting teacher-student relationship. A healthy interpersonal relationship is one of the elements that cannot be ignored in human life because it affects humans' productivity and achievement in all fields, including education (Fan, 2012).

Considering the teachers' roles are very important for students, it is expected that both of them can build a harmonious relationship in the learning process. Finally, with all the limitations of this study, it is hoped that further research can explore more comprehensively the teachers' roles in English language teaching and involve more participants. Future research can also involve students to see their views on a healthy and supportive teacher-student relationship. Also, to the policymakers, it is hoped that seminars or workshops that

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discuss the students' personality types and how to build good interpersonal relationships can also be held as part of efforts to improve teacher professionalism in the future.

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