

REVISITING THE CONCEPT OF *GURU* IN VARIOUS CULTURAL PERSPECTIVES

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Abstract:

Teacher education institutions worldwide have mostly attempted to shape their candidate teachers with positive traits of an effective teacher. However, this notion of equipping the future teachers with features of an ideal figure of a teacher seems to be obscure without any comprehensible identifications of what the features are. This study was then written to report an analytical review on the conception of a great teacher under the noble idea of guru as understood in Javanese and Indian culture. By understanding the various cultural perspectives of the term ‘an ideal teacher’ and identifying the characteristics of guru, this article can later be used as a foundation of defining what type of a teacher that a teacher education institution has been working on. This was conducted through literature review and analytical qualitative study of some candidate teachers taking Micro Teaching course in the Faculty of Teacher Training in Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya. This study attempted to identify connections between the proposed theories discussed and personal perspectives of the candidate teachers conveyed through their reflective writing products.

Keywords: *teacher education, idea teacher characteristics, reflection*

INTRODUCTION

To start with, one well-known quote by William Arthur Ward (1921-1994) brilliantly explains,

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*“The mediocre teacher tells.
The good teacher explains.
The superior teacher demonstrates.
The great teacher inspires.”*

It is implied above that merely having a teaching certificate and practically teaching a subject discipline do not necessarily make an individual be a great teacher. A mediocre teacher is said to just tell what the students must and must not do. A good teacher explains why the things must and must not be done. Meanwhile, a superior teacher becomes a role model for the students by showing exemplary skills, knowledge, and attitude of being a teacher. However, a great one inspires. To inspire literally means to “give somebody the desire, confidence, or enthusiasm to do something well” (Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary, 2000). In other words, in the world of professional teacher education, a great teacher educator is a teacher who can provide the candidate teachers with the desire, confidence, or enthusiasm to teach well. The four classifications of being a (1) mediocre, (2) good, (3) superior, and (4) great teacher later underpin the significance of the present research study.

Furthermore, within the Indonesian pedagogy currency, Susanto (2014) took an ontological perspective in understanding the term “teacher” using a convergent approach of Javanese and Chinese references. He further questioned whether in order that the students to be successful they have to obey what the teacher tells them to do and the attitudes that the teacher does must be strictly followed. His statement implies that whether a ‘superior’ teacher classification is already sufficient in the Javanese (or Indonesian) culture. With this regard, taking a closer look to a Javanese culture, Ngadiman (2009) posits that the understanding of “*guru*” in Javanese viewpoint does not stop there. He said that a teacher must be knowledgeable not only about science, but also manner or attitudes and life lessons. Taking a Javanese shadow puppet character of *Semar*, he explained that a teacher must be positive in a way that he has no prejudice

against others, smart in putting himself in different situations, and restrain to saying bad things of, about, and to others. He emphasizes that a teacher must not just transfer knowledge to the students (good teachers), but also educate the students, and inspire others to not just instruct but construct the students in such a way that the students (and peer teachers) may be inspired and enthusiastic in their life as a human in general and in the teaching and learning process as education stakeholders in particular (Ngadiman, 2008). Educating is a synonym to creating situations that make others feel, believe, and act in a desired way; in other words, inspiring (as what a great teacher does). This viewpoint suggests a similar concept of an ideal teacher as what is suggested by William Arthur Ward.

Furthermore, an understanding of the term ‘the true teacher’ or *guru* explained in Fred (2010) has augmented our understanding of the term that is much different than that of the term ‘teacher’. Some sentences quoted below are taken from the letter sent by one of his trainees which later opened up Fred’s horizon in understanding the term noble version of the word ‘*guru*’.

“A teacher leads you by the hand. A guru leads you by example.

A teacher sharpens your mind. A guru opens your mind.

A teacher instructs you. A guru constructs you.

A teacher answers your questions. A guru questions your answers.

A teacher takes responsibility for your growth and education. A guru makes you responsible for your growth and education.”

– Ramesh (in Fred, 2010)

The sentences above explain that a *guru* means so much more than a teacher. They do not contradict one another, but one is just simply more meaningful than the other. Therefore, it is important to investigate how far candidate teachers registered in a teacher education institution understand

the concept of an ideal teacher that they have in mind. In respect to this, Eisner (1983: 2) posits that “teachers are more like orchestra conductors than technicians; they need rules of thumb and educational imagination, not scientific prescriptions”. It is strongly suggested that being a teacher needs the best educational imagination possible of an individual; in order that the candidate teachers, along with the other educational stakeholders, can work hand in hand in creating the foretold educational state. The question to be asked here is then: “How do the noble concepts of *guru* relate to current candidate teachers’ ideal figure of a teacher in Indonesia?”.

Native language is not an absolute feature of an ideal English teacher

To begin with, Kavanagh (2011) remarks that an ideal figure of an English teacher does not necessarily support the idea that native English speaking teachers (NESTs) are better than non-native English speaking teachers (NNESTs), in spite of the fact that there was a strong tendency of having NESTs than NNESTs for South Korean students. He further explains that English language teaching (ELT) is not a natural gift of NNTs but a profession that entails due training and efficiency. In this respect, NNESTs have an equal share of teaching opportunities worldwide since World Englishes have been obtaining more popularity each day. The world of ELT is not to be dominated by NESTS, as the native speaker is not always a valid yardstick for the global uses of English (Quirk in Kavanagh, 2011).

Confirming the idea proposed by Medgyes (1992), a figure of an ideal teacher can be divided into two major classifications based on their language nativity; and this division is important to be used in identifying characteristics of an ideal teacher. The first classification describes the ideal NEST as an individual who has achieved a high level of ability in his students’ mother tongue; and the second classification depicts the ideal NNEST as an individual who has achieved near native-like proficiency in the language. Kavanagh (2011) further remarks that the dichotomy of

NEST and NNEST seems to be divergent one another in a way that one cannot fall into the category of the other's. In particular, an ideal NNEST cannot be evaluated using NEST's qualities; unless it is going to be an uphill battle for the NNESTs.

Viewpoints from EFL countries

Various studies across the globe have resulted in various findings on their viewpoints of an ideal teacher of English as a foreign language (EFL). In order to have a broader understanding to this issue, some findings of the latest research studies are described in the following paragraphs. However, this set of literature is reviewed in such a way that the findings of this research can be compared accordingly. The research reports to be discussed include those from Hungary, Iran, Saudi, Thailand, and Turkey.

1. Hungarian perspective

Firstly, a study was conducted by Ida (2017) and found that a good teacher should (1) make the students understand the teaching materials, (2) be objective, (3) be good looking, (4) pay attention to the students such as helping them with their problems, and (5) encourage the students. The five personal traits were put in the order of importance according to the Hungarian students. Additionally, there were also some professional marks that represent the actions shown by a good teacher, i.e. the teacher has to (1) support learning, (2) objective in assessment, (3) motivate the students, (4) maintain the discipline, (5) be prestigious, (6) love his job, and (7) consistent. These personal and professional competencies were constructed by not focusing only on helping the student with learning the language, but they encompass various approaches in building a figure of a good teacher. Table 1 below summarises the qualities of an ideal teacher in the viewpoint of Hungarian students based on the above reports.

Table 1. Characteristics of a good teacher from the Hungarian students' perspectives

| No. | Personal Characteristics | Professional Characteristics |
|-----|--|-------------------------------|
| 1. | Making the students understand the materials | Supporting learning |
| 2. | Being objective | Being objective in assessment |
| 3. | Being good-looking | Motivating |
| 4. | Being helpful in learning | Maintaining discipline |
| 5. | Encouraging | Being prestigious |
| 6. | | Loving his job |
| 7. | | Being consistent |

2. Iranian Perspective

Second, teachers and learner in Iran had different perceptions in defining what characterizes an effective teacher. However, the characteristics of an effective teacher according to them involved the teachers to be (1) active in assigning homework, (2) integrating group activities into the classroom, (3) preparing the lesson well, (4) using lesson plans, (5) assessing what the students have learned reasonably, (6) teaching English using the first language (or L1) of the students (such as Persian), (7) knowledgeable in the target language (or L2) and pedagogical practices such as methods and techniques, and (8) positive in behaving towards the students (Shishavan & Sadeghi, 2009). This view on the characteristics of an effective teacher in Iran is similar to that in Hungary to the extent that both tapped upon personal and professional practices. Next, another report on the features of an effective ELT teacher by Zamani and Ahangari (2016) identified that the features involved having the ability to (1) develop proper relationships with students, (2) build students' confidence, (3) maintain discipline in the classroom, (4) create an entertaining atmosphere to carry out the class activities, (5) listen to students' viewpoints and opinions and

let them express themselves, (6) promote communicative language learning through activities and discussion, and (7) make courses interesting and being smart to deviate attention of students from everything else to the topic. These characteristics of an effective teacher in the viewpoint of Iranian language learners support the previous research report conducted in the same country with different research subjects, locations and time periods. Table 2 below summarises the qualities of an ideal teacher in the viewpoint of Iranian students based on the above reports.

Table 2. Characteristics of an effective teacher from the Iranian students' perspectives

| No. | Personal Characteristics | Professional Characteristics |
|-----|--|---|
| 1. | Being positive in behaving towards the students | Being active in assigning homework |
| 2. | Developing proper relationships with the students | Integrating group activities into the classroom |
| 3. | Building the students' confidence | Preparing the lesson well |
| 4. | Maintaining discipline | Using lesson plans |
| 5. | Creating an entertaining atmosphere | Assessing reasonably |
| 6. | Listening to the students' viewpoints and opinions | Teaching using the students' the L1 |
| 7. | | Being knowledgeable in the L2 and pedagogical practices |
| 8. | | Promoting communicative language learning |
| 9. | | Making the lesson interesting |

3. Saudi perspective

Third, reporting at a research study in Saudi and Yemen, Mahmoud & Thabet (2013) identified that there were qualities under the socio-affective category that constructed a “good teacher”. The qualities described that a good teacher was (1) patient, (2) relaxed, (3) good tempered, (4) fair, (5) helpful, (6) encouraging, (7) respectful, (8) kind, (9) loving, and (10) caring. Meanwhile, the factor of gender was dropped as it was considered to be insignificant in the viewpoints of respondents from both countries. In particular, both respondents wanted the figure of a good teacher to be competent and qualified, with the respondents from Saudi wanted the teacher to use lots of translations between English and Arabic, while this feature was not strongly supported by those from Yemen. With regard to the “ideal teacher” characteristics identified in that report, another report by Al-Khairi (2015) mentioned that an ideal figure of a Saudi English teacher should (1) be available to help their students, (2) be dedicated and committed, (3) exhibit exemplary attitudes, (4) explain according to the level of the students, (5) keep himself abreast of the latest developments to ensure up-to-date knowledge of the subject, (6) provide their students with clear instructions and accurate answers, (7) exploit group/pair work effectively, (8) use modern teaching aids, and (9) help the students to become independent learners. Some of the qualities identified in Al-Khairi (2015) are shared with those in Mahmoud and Thabet (2013). One prominent point to underline is that both reports found that a figure of an ideal teacher was not at all gender-biased. Table 3 below summarises the qualities of an ideal teacher in the viewpoint of Saudi students based on the above reports.

Table 3. Characteristics of an effective teacher from the Saudi students' perspectives

| No. | Personal Characteristics | Professional Characteristics |
|-----|--------------------------|--|
| 1. | Being patient | Helping the students in learning |
| 2. | Being relaxed | Being dedicated and committed |
| 3. | Being good tempered | Exhibiting exemplary attitudes |
| 4. | Being fair | Providing suitable explanations |
| 5. | Being helpful | Keeping abreast of the latest developments of knowledge on the subject |
| 6. | Encouraging | Providing clear instructions and accurate answers |
| 7. | Being respectful | Exploiting group/pair work effectively |
| 8. | Being kind | Using modern teaching aids |
| 9. | Loving | Helping the students to be independent learners |
| 10. | Caring | |

4. Thai perspective

Fourth, some research reports within Thailand scope found several more or less findings with regard to the socio-affective qualities attached to an ideal figure of a teacher. One of them was written by Wei and Onsawad (2007) in which some characteristics of an ideal teacher were identified from 11th graders' responses. The characteristics described that an ideal teacher should (1) be a strong leader, (2) more understanding, (3)

helpful and friendly, and (4) provide a certain degree of freedom and responsibility to the students. However, teacher's strictness was said to be supportive in constructing the students' attitudes towards English learning. It was concluded that, in order to improve the students' learning attitudes and achievements, it is prerequisite to strengthen all the qualities identified. Table 4 below summarises the qualities of an ideal teacher in the viewpoint of Saudi students based on the above reports.

Table 4. Characteristics of an effective teacher from the Thai students' perspectives

| No. | Personal Characteristics | Professional Characteristics |
|-----|----------------------------|---|
| 1. | Having a strong leadership | Providing freedom and responsibility for the students |
| 2. | Understanding | Being strict in teaching |
| 3. | Being helpful and friendly | |

5. Turkish perspective

Lastly, a research study report by Dinçer *et. al* (2013) investigated the characteristics of an ideal teacher in the viewpoint of Turkey learners by classifying the characteristics into four classifications, namely socio-affective skills, pedagogical knowledge, subject-matter knowledge, and personality characteristics. However, this study focuses on how a figure of an ideal teacher in relation to the English learners; thus, the employed characteristics include those under socio-affective skills and personality characteristics. It was identified that the characteristics under the socio-affective skills category include (1) having enthusiasm in teaching English, (2) having good relationships with students, (3) caring students' needs about English, and (4) motivating students by creating autonomy supportive environments. Meanwhile, an effective language teacher has the personal characteristics of (1) humorist, (2) enthusiastic, (3) creative, (4) tolerant, (5) patient, (6) kind, (7) sensible, (8) open-minded, (9) flexible,

(10) optimistic, (11) enthusiastic, and (12) having positive attitudes towards new ideas. Next, Uygun (2013) took a different method and managed to identify 33 characteristics expressed by Turkish university preparatory school students, NESTs, and NNESTs altogether. Unfortunately, the report was not explained in details in a way that the results were not classified which were from the students', NESTs', and NNESTs' responses respectively. However, the findings indicated that there were discrepancies in the qualities of an effective teacher from the students', NEST's, and NNESTs' perspective, although partially. Table 5 below summarises the qualities of an ideal teacher in the viewpoint of Turkish students based on the above reports.

Table 5. Characteristics of an effective teacher from the Turkish students' perspectives

| No. | Personal Characteristics | Professional Characteristics |
|-----|--------------------------|---|
| 1. | Being humorist | Having enthusiasm in teaching |
| 2. | Being enthusiastic | Having good relationships with the students |
| 3. | Being creative | Caring the students' needs about learning English |
| 4. | Being tolerant | Motivating students |
| 5. | Being patient | Having positive attitude towards new ideas |
| 6. | Being kind | |
| 7. | Being sensible | |
| 8. | Being open-minded | |
| 9. | Being flexible | |
| 10. | Being optimistic | |
| 11. | Being enthusiastic | |

6. Indonesian perspective

The following table summarizes the characteristics of an effective teacher or *guru* in the viewpoints of candidate teachers registered in Widya Mandala Catholic University Surabaya.

Table 6. Characteristics of an effective teacher from the Indonesian candidate teachers' perspective

| No. | Respondent (pseudonym) | Characteristics of An Ideal Teacher |
|-----|---------------------------|---|
| 1. | Anita | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Having teaching methods that meet the students' learning strategies and styles- Being knowledgeable in the subject discipline- Being patient in teaching- Delivering the learning materials comprehensibly- Motivating the students- Inspiring the students to be an English teacher |
| 2. | Billy | <ul style="list-style-type: none">- Not being moody- Teaching professionally- Proving teaching and learning methods that accommodate the students' learning strategies and styles- Showing an exemplary level of leadership- Supporting shared decision-making habits |

| No. | Respondent (pseudonym) | Characteristics of An Ideal Teacher |
|-----|---------------------------|---|
| 3. | Catherine | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Respecting the students by being warm to them - Caring about the students' learning needs - Listening and providing solutions to the students' learning problems - Developing the students' learning skills and knowledge - Being friendly and wise |
| 4. | Dominic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being clear in explaining the learning materials and instructions - Mastering appropriate techniques and methods for the students' varied learning strategies and styles - Being professional in teaching by not bringing personal issues to the classroom |
| 5. | Eugene | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding - Raising the students' motivation - Treating the students equally |
| 6. | Frank | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Friendly - Providing constructive feedbacks and suggestions - Motivating the students to learn - Believing in equal rights |
| 7. | George | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Treating the students equally - Supporting and motivating |

| No. | Respondent (pseudonym) | Characteristics of An Ideal Teacher |
|-----|---------------------------|---|
| | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Having a good classroom management skill - Having a good communication skill - Being discipline - Being Friendly - Being Wise |
| 8. | Hobbs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Caring - Being humorous - Being rofessional |
| 9. | Ian | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Showing good attitudes - Motivating the students - Being helpful |
| 10. | Jessica | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Being humorous and serious with a right amount of portion - Being able to raise the students' enthusiasm |

Most of the respondents acknowledge that being an ideal teacher is not easy. It requires an extensive set of personal and professional characteristics in order that the students can be successful in learning the subject materials and building their human characters. This implies the basic concept of education that is not synonym of teaching or transferring the knowledge to the students. Most of the candidate teachers have also admitted that it requires a long and rigorous process to be a teacher; which is not necessarily represented by a teaching certificate and record of long teaching hours. As an illustration, Gruwell (2007) meticulously tells a true story of how education does not only prevail in transferring knowledge, but also saving lives of the students by changing their opinions about others

and sharing common life principles. By then, education does not merely a rhetorical concept but one of the basic human needs; that education does not simply put the students from one point to another, but also act as a means to save the students' lives and those of many others.

The shared features of the figure of *guru* across the perspectives

The shared agreements across cultural perspectives and levels of students are important to be identified in order to be used as a foundation of determining how far, or short, the perspectives of the Indonesian candidate teachers in interpreting the concept of an ideal teacher or *guru*. The following figure depicts the shared agreements across all the perspectives presented previously. The shape of hexagonal is derived from the six different perspectives explained above and the twelve characteristics mentioned in them are the results of summarizing the features of the respondents' answer in their relation to the other perspectives from different countries. The characteristics mentioned are representative in a way that each character represents one or more other characteristics mentioned in the research reports.

Figure 1. The shared-agreements across the perspectives



Conclusion

Revisiting the concept of *guru*, this study found that the personal and professional traits of their ideal teacher are very much similar to those from other literature. Therefore, it can be concluded that (1) cultural-sensitive principles such as those mentioned in Figure 1 are identical of the concept of a father. This emphasizes that the figure of *Semar*, as the father of *Punokawan*, as explained in Ngadiman (2009) has encompassed the characteristics of a *guru* that much more than just teaching, but also having the aforementioned characteristics, namely (1) caring, (2) discipline, (3) fair, (4) good quality leadership, (5) humorous, (6) inspiring, (7) motivating, (8) objective, (9) patient, (10) skillful, (11) smart, and (12) well behave.

In other words the concept of *guru* as Javanese understands it as a blending from two words '*digugu*' and '*ditiru*' does not mean that a teacher has to be used as the role model but a teacher is a noble example of a figure to be obeyed and used as a role model; with no coercive sense, but voluntary understanding of an honorable figure. This also supports the idea conveyed in the Chinese proverb of 'teachers open the door, but the students enter themselves' that the students will follow the examples shown by their teacher only, and only if, the examples are unquestionably worth-following.

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