

Educational Philosophies of Teachers

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Abstract

Every year the research produced in education is vast and has the positive effect of advancing the profession in ever more innovative, sophisticated, and humanitarian ways. However, although there is this vast array of work showcasing new approaches, activities and providing academic discussion, it can sometimes be beneficial to reflect on the more fundamental aspects of what we do and why we do it.

This paper presents the results of a small-scale examination of the educational philosophies of 18 teachers. The results reveal the elements of education that are seen as paramount by teachers along with those which are less common. From these, a clear image of how teachers view the profession, and their role can be seen. Additionally, the aspects identified as important within teachers' educational philosophies were presented to students. The elements given importance by students are also presented and contrasted with the previous results.

Introduction

What type of teacher are you? What would your students describe you as? What would your colleagues describe you as? Is there consistency among these views? There is likely to be a great deal of variance in the answers to these questions quite simply due to the ubiquitous nature of labels describing teachers. A simple search reveals a whole host of labels used to describe different types of teacher, such as activist teacher, modern teacher, buddy teacher, entertainer teacher and traditional teacher (Helplineph, 2022; Unicheck, 2017). Although many of these labels are fairly self-explanatory, the labels are often provided with explanations that attempt to offer detail. The “modern teacher”, for example, is a teacher that is very open to the use of the latest technology in education and operates under the belief that technological development runs in parallel with pedagogical advancement (Helplinph, 2022). Other examples can be that of the

“activist teacher” who possesses a fervour for specific social issues and uses class time to present a certain social agenda, or the “buddy teacher” who aims to occupy a role akin to that of a big brother or big sister (Unicheck, 2017).

Such labelling may seem extremely reductionist and two dimensional, but it is consistent with much discourse outside of education where complex social realities are neatly divided up into easily digestible chunks. Yet, as a form of human interaction involving multiple people of various backgrounds and within a variety of settings, the reality is infinitely greyer and more complex. As such, it is likely that all these labels exist within each of us as teachers with certain ones coming to the forefront at different times and as a result of different conditions.

English Language Teachers

If we look specifically at the English language teaching literature, different authors offer different types of teacher (Harmer, 2015; Scrivener, 2011) and a great deal of overlap exists between the categories of teacher put forward. Scrivener (2011), for example, puts forward the three teacher labels of explainer, involver and enabler. The explainer teacher occupies the role of a giver of information in a classroom that is highly teacher centred. Classes often involve the teacher explaining the subject or lecturing with students occupying a largely passive role. Although students are not personally involved or challenged and practice is often through individual exercises, lessons can be entertaining when delivered with enthusiasm and energy by the teacher. The explainer role described by Scrivener would seem to closely correspond with what might be a commonly held view in much of society of what a teacher does and how a classroom is, perhaps as a result of people’s own experiences in education. In this sense, the explainer teacher represents what might be considered the default or traditional view of teaching and the teacher.

The involver loosens control in the classroom due to a belief in a greater need to focus on students and to allow them more practice and experimentation. According to Scrivener, due to the enabler teacher’s greater familiarity with teaching methodology, the teacher involves students more by using a variety of engaging activities while still maintaining control of the classroom.

The final label offered by Scrivener, the enabler, represents a confident teacher equipped with a variety of methodologies who is confident enough to share or even give full control of the classroom with students. In an enabler’s class, decisions are often shared or negotiated, and the teacher takes direction from the students. It is under this label that we get educational metaphors

such as a teacher being a “guide”, “counsellor” or “resource” (Scrivener, 2011, p.18). In addition to a strong knowledge of methodology, the enabler is also aware of the interpersonal dynamics of a classroom as well as the feelings and thinking of individuals within.

Scrivener makes the point that all teachers are explainers, involvers and enablers at different times and in different circumstances. However, my own observations of teachers over many years suggests that the teachers do not occupy the roles of explainer, involver or enabler for the same amount of time. Teachers have their own preferences, whether they are conscious of them or not. Some teachers, for example, will occupy the role of explainer almost exclusively, while others may more frequently adopt the role of engager, despite the circumstances being extremely similar. The difference in the likelihood of teachers occupying the different roles may well be due to their familiarity with different methodologies, as Scrivener suggests, and which sets his labels apart from the more personality-based labels presented at the start of this paper. Yet, teachers who hold similar teaching qualifications, experience and teach the same classes still do not occupy explainer, involver and enabler roles in the same amount nor teach in the same way. Something more would seem to be at play.

Educational Philosophy

A teacher’s personality, familiarity with methodology, other education, age, experience, amongst other variables, are likely to influence how they teach. So too are their fundamental beliefs regarding education, what can be called their educational philosophy. It can be said that a person’s educational philosophy represents a gestalt to which a teacher’s education, age, personality, experience and other variables contribute.

All teachers have an educational philosophy whether they are conscious of it or not. For the purposes of this paper, focus will be on two areas of teachers’ educational philosophies. The first are the epistemic aims of education; the question of what we are there to do and what knowledge we are there to give. Of course, at its most basic level, an English teacher is there to teach English, but many would suggest that education has a socio-political function in helping to cultivate moral citizens who have characteristics and attributes that align with the needs and expectations of the society in which the education takes place (Siegel, 2009). On the other hand, rather cultivating “acceptable” characteristics and belief sets, some highlight that rather than being a provider of knowledge, the purpose of education should focus on the ability of the individual to process information, this is, the development of their cognitive abilities. This view

is clearly evident in popular education quotes such as “Education is what remains once one has forgotten what one has learned in school” and “The purpose of education is to replace an empty mind with an open one” from Einstein and Malcolm Forbes respectively. For these commentators and many academics, education is much more than the provision of information as “educators have a responsibility to help individuals think for themselves” (Robertson, 2009, p.13).

Whatever someone holds as the epistemic aims of education, the second area or next question will likely be concerned with how to go about achieving them. In an educational philosophy, this is not yet a matter of methodology, but more fundamentally it is a question of how one should be as a teacher, what one’s purpose and roles are in education. As means of illustration, an example can be seen in the work of Rogers and Frelberg (1994) who suggest three qualities as being of fundamental importance for teachers:

- Respect – Being positive and non-judgemental.
- Empathy – Seeing things through the eyes of the learner.
- Authenticity – Being yourself and not being afraid to be vulnerable.

Rogers and Frelberg (1994) suggest that all of these are vital to establish rapport between teacher and students. The importance of rapport in language education is suggestive of the belief that the development of knowledge is best achieved as a collective endeavour. Ultimately though, the work of Rogers and Frelberg (1994) shows that how a teacher should be focuses not on which particular methodology they choose, but more fundamentally on how they put themselves forward, interact with others and see their role in education.

Methods

What do teachers believe as being of fundamental importance in education and being a teacher? To attempt to answer these questions and examine teachers’ educational philosophies in more detail, 19 language teachers wrote a paragraph under the simple title of “My educational philosophy”. There was no set word limit and paragraphs differed greatly in length with the average being 108 words. Emergent thematic coding was used to analyse the paragraphs with the frequency of the emergent items also being recorded.

Following emergent thematic coding, emergent items were presented to students via a survey in Japanese and English. Students were asked to identify the two most important items

when considering the role of an English teacher, the two least important items for a teacher, and to rank each item individually in terms of importance via a Likert scale. A total of 257 responses were received.

Results

Although expressed in different terms across the paragraphs, common themes were emergent in teachers' paragraphs. For ease of presentation Table 1 below shows the emergent items expressed as things teachers should do or be.

Table 1

Emergent Items and Their Frequency

Frequency	A teacher should...
8	...motivate learners.
8	...act as a guide / mentor for students.
7	...encourage collaboration.
6	...create a comfortable atmosphere that allows students to be themselves and open up.
5	...be pedagogically flexible.
4	...develop critical thinking.
4	...develop intellectual curiosity.
3	...create a comfortable atmosphere for ideas.
2	...be a reflective practitioner and learner.

A total of nine items that constituted separate beliefs within an educational philosophy were found in the paragraphs. None of these were only found in a single teacher though some were much more common than others, as can be seen by the frequency column above. Here we can see that the teacher's role as an educational motivator and as a guide or mentor for students were common aspects of teachers' philosophies, whereas the importance of teachers reflecting on and learning from their practice was not. Additionally, some items, while separate, do share similar conceptual terrain. The need to develop critical thinking and the need to develop intellectual curiosity, for example, though focusing on different elements can coexist within a

category of cognitive development. The same can be true of creating a comfortable environment within in which different ideas can coexist, and a comfortable environment within which students can be themselves and open up.

With some items sharing similar conceptual terrain, these items were merged, and a reduced seven items were presented to students via a survey. Though presented in Japanese and English, for the sake of space, only the English version is shown below in Table 2. The numbers following each item represents the frequency with which the concept appeared in teachers' philosophies. As can be seen, the first two on the list are an amalgamation of two different items.

Table 2

Survey Items Presented to Students

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• A teacher should create a comfortable atmosphere for students that allows them to be themselves freely and share their true opinions. <u>9 (3+6)</u>• A teacher should encourage students to think critically and develop their intellectual curiosity. <u>8(4+4)</u>• A teacher should motivate students by being supportive, friendly and using interesting content in class. <u>8</u>• A teacher should be a guide / mentor and help students to become better and more autonomous learners. <u>8</u>• A teacher should encourage collaboration and create an atmosphere where all members of the class (including the teacher) are teaching and learning from each other. <u>7</u>• A teacher should be able to switch to different teaching methods depending on the context, subject or needs of the class. <u>5</u>• A teacher should always be learning and reflecting on how he/she teaches and why he/she teaches in that way. <u>2</u>

The results of the survey showed that creating a comfortable atmosphere and motivating students were overwhelmingly identified as the two most important aspects for an English teacher (Figure 1).

Figure 1

Most Important Aspects for an English Teacher

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When looking at the least important aspects, we can see that the distribution is less clear cut. However, being a reflective teacher, being pedagogically flexible and encouraging critical thinking and intellectual curiosity were strongly identified as aspects that were of the least importance for an English teacher.

Table 3

Distribution of Responses for Different Items

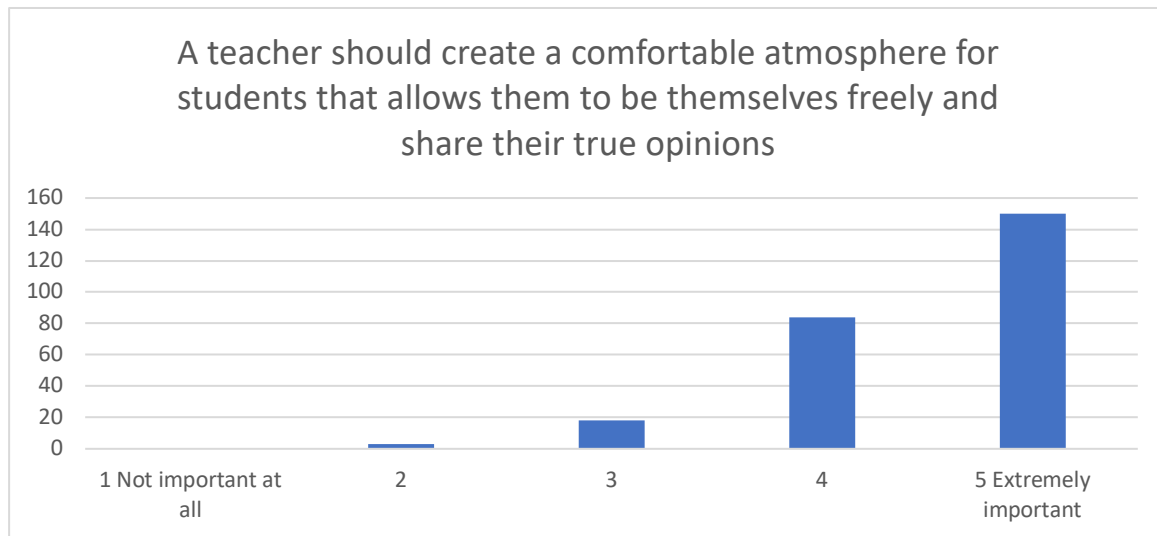
	<u>Not important at all</u>			<u>Extremely important</u>	
	1	2	3	4	5
Create a comfortable atmosphere	0	3	18	84	150
Encourage critical thinking	7	29	75	91	52
Motivate students	0	9	31	67	147
Be a guide / mentor	1	15	54	115	70
Encourage collaboration	0	9	45	91	110

Pedagogical flexibility	2	27	68	105	53
Be reflective on his/her teaching	9	18	89	97	52

The individual items ranked on a Likert scale can be seen above in Table 3. The distribution of scores is consistent with previous results and can be divided into two types. The first is a distribution of scores similar to that shown in Figure 2 below. Here a large majority of responses being found in the “extremely important” column and then cascading down through the other columns with no responses in the final column. This distribution was found for creating a comfortable atmosphere in class, motivating students, and encouraging collaboration.

Figure 2

Student Endorsement of Teachers Creating a Comfortable Atmosphere

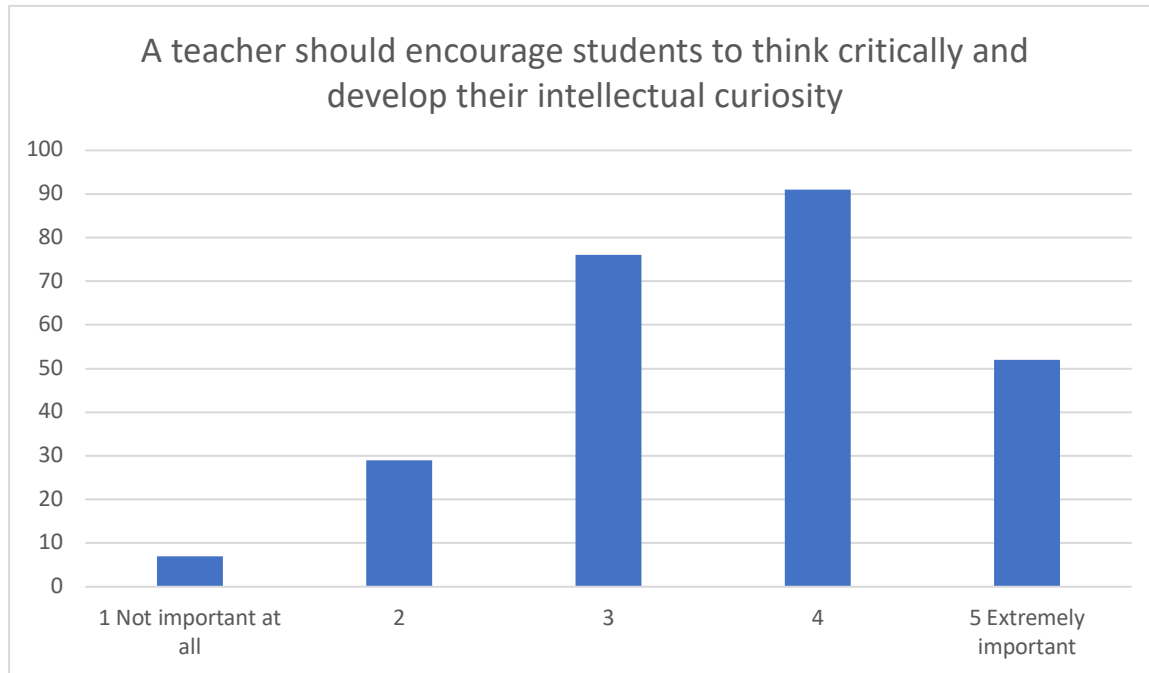


The distribution of other items is similar to that of developing critical thinking, shown in Table 6. While students overall see it as important, it is to a much lesser degree than those above. Additionally, the large number of students that selected the middle option suggest that many students are quite ambivalent to them. This distribution was typical for developing critical thinking, being a guide/mentor, being pedagogically flexible, and being a reflective teacher.

These items are also the only ones that registered a notable number of responses in the “not important” column, including some in the “not important at all” column.

Figure 3

Student Endorsement of Teachers Encouraging Critical Thinking Development



Discussion

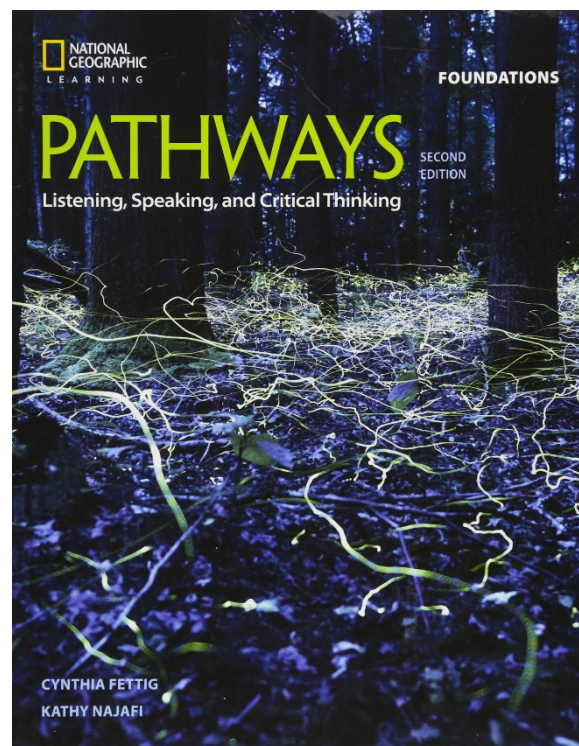
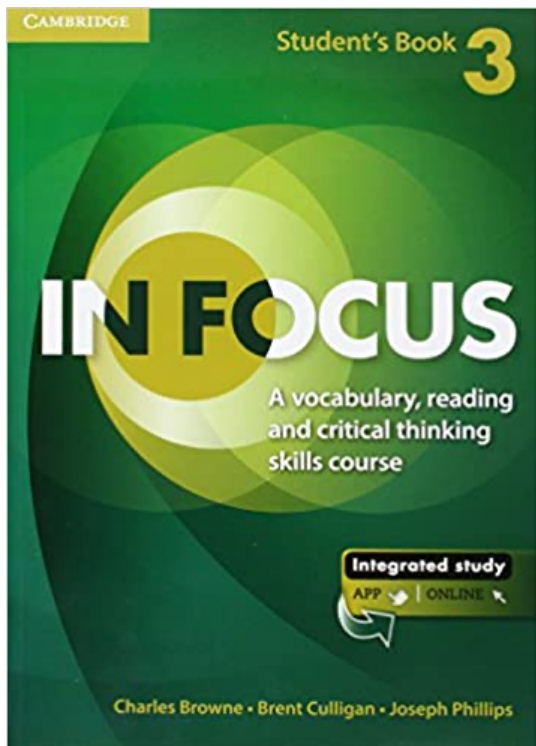
When examining the analysis of teachers’ educational philosophies, we can see that the emergent items are overwhelmingly focused on their role as a teacher. Of the nine emergent items only two featured what might be considered the epistemic aims of education: developing critical thinking and encouraging intellectual curiosity. This suggests that teachers attach greater importance to their role in the classroom than to the nature of the knowledge they are there to develop. The educational philosophies of teachers would most closely align with the enabler view of a teacher. Teachers highlighting the vital nature of motivating students, creating a comfortable atmosphere, encouraging collaboration, being pedagogically flexible, reflecting on their own practice, and being a “guide”, “mentor” or “facilitator”, shows a focus on teacher performance rather than musings on the nature of the subject or the cognitive development of

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students. Despite this, however, it may be the case that consideration of the nature of the subject is implied in the highlighting of these classroom-based performative items. Identifying with the enabler type of teacher is suggestive of a belief in the nature of the subject in that English is a skill that requires practice, variety, making mistakes and so on, and that a teacher needs to adopt a role that is conducive to creating an environment that allows these to occur so that learning and cognitive development can take place. Of course, whether teachers make these connections is not evident from a simple examination of their paragraphs, it can just be said that in their paragraphs teachers are more cognizant of and place more importance on philosophical questions of them as a teacher, their role and how they should be in the classroom, rather than epistemic concerns and aims.

When looking at the results of the student survey, it is perhaps no surprise that they give greatest endorsement to educational philosophy items that have a clear connection to them as students, such as motivating them, creating a positive atmosphere, and encouraging collaboration. The results of the individual scores of items reinforce this point and shows that students expect to be active in the classroom and desire a teacher that helps them to be so. As with the teachers' ideal which is suggested through their paragraphs, so too do students see the enabler type of teacher as being most desirable. Ultimately, there is a great deal of agreement between teachers and students as elements of teaching philosophies that involve greater interaction between classroom members and elements that focus on developing the conditions that allow these are given greatest weight.

Not all is in agreement between teachers and students, though. The idea that education involves some form of cognitive development beyond the simple acquisition of subject knowledge was a recurrent theme in teachers' educational philosophies, albeit one that was much less frequent than themes relating to performative concerns. Although the development of students' critical thinking and intellectual curiosity have long been considered by many to be a part of what education *is*, it has only much more recently been seen by many in the profession to be an important goal of language education. This is especially evident in the common use of the term "critical thinking" on many EFL textbooks used today. Two examples of global textbooks using the term, *In Focus* (Browne et al., 2021) and *Pathways* (Fetig & Najafi, 2018) are shown on the following page.



Though the inclusion of critical thinking development would seem to be prudent, especially given that such textbooks follow a largely content-based approach, the value of critical thinking as part of the language teaching profession is a debate separate to that of this paper. It is raised here simply because the results of the study point to a gulf between teachers' and students' thinking regarding it. The critical thinking labels that adorn many textbooks would seem to be there to attract the teacher rather than the student; a reflection of the reality that teachers are the ones overwhelmingly in charge of textbook selection for courses. Of course, one may argue that students not giving a strong endorsement of critical thinking development is precisely a reason for its inclusion and that, ultimately, the teacher knows best. However, as the results would seem to suggest that critical thinking development is not viewed by students as something of great relevance to language education, mention of it in class, on the cover of textbooks or on course syllabi is likely to have very little impact on students' desire to take a course.

Directions for future research

This small-scale study began as a means of satisfying my own curiosity about the fundamental beliefs that teachers have about language education. The results proved to be illuminating and offered future avenues for research to paint a much deeper and more complete picture of

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teachers' educational philosophies. The following questions arose which may be best answered through follow up interviews and other qualitative means:

How have these teachers arrived at these philosophies?

What influenced them? When? Where? How?

Is their educational philosophy consistent across their teaching of different subjects?

To what degree is their philosophy mitigated by contextual features?

Is it possible to 'view' their philosophy in their teaching?

Do national educational needs / preferences / differences influence the educational philosophies that are espoused?

BIO DATA

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