

## Students' Perceptions of Effective TEFL Instructors in Cambodian Higher Education Institutions

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### ABSTRACT

English language as a medium of instruction has been popular under globalization. English is now a popular medium of instruction and a major subject in Cambodia because most higher education institutions (HEIs) have adopted it as a common language for a learning curriculum. However, teaching English effectively has also been a concern in Cambodia because learners are not proficient or fluent in English. Moreover, most English classes have been taught by fresh graduates with little English teaching experience, and some instructors even teach subjects not in their field. Therefore, this study surveyed 265 year-4 TEFL students at three universities by asking them to rate their instructors' teaching effectiveness. Instructors' qualifications, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and personal and interpersonal characteristics are used to examine students' perceptions of effective TEFL instructors. The study showed higher percentages of students' positive perceptions of the five domains of effective TEFL instructors. The findings are also consistent with the results of previous studies, suggesting that these qualities and characteristics should be must-have criteria for TEFL instructors in higher education. Thus, educational institutions should create certain criteria for selecting qualified university instructors. The findings can help the institutions develop human resources with these quality aspects or elements when selecting effective English language instructors. HEIs can use these criteria based on the results of this study, while TEFL instructors need to develop or improve themselves to have these qualities and other attributes for English teaching.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of globalization and internationalization, content teaching in English, also known as English as a medium of instruction, has grown in popularity, especially at higher education institutions that accept foreign faculty members, researchers, and students

from diverse linguistic backgrounds [1]. Moreover, English is regarded as a global language used worldwide [2]–[4]. As a result, English language teaching has received much attention in countries where English is the second language. English is the major language for many situations, such as instruction, social services, business communication, and occupational purposes.

In Cambodia, English is now a popular medium of instruction as most HEIs have adopted English as a common language for a learning curriculum. All instructors and learners must use English as a communicative language at school. However, teaching English effectively has also been an issue in Cambodia, as many learners are not proficient or fluent in English. Interestingly, most English classes have been conducted by instructors who have just graduated with a bachelor's degree and become instructors. Some instructors teach the subjects that are not in their field. This phenomenon is related to the short-term career of instructors in schools with low-performing students taught by the least-qualified instructors [5]. They take jobs without content and pedagogical knowledge, making their teaching inappropriate and challenging to achieve learning goals. Instructors' teaching effectiveness is essential in higher education [6].

Furthermore, the important role of instructors is that they influence students' achievement, which is greater than any other institution's effect [7]. Instructors are in a powerful position to provide knowledge regarding the teaching and learning process, and their insights and professional judgments are necessary to add balance and depth to the current instructor effectiveness evidence base [8]. Some teachers also used modern tools in their teaching. However, students did not feel interested. Sey and Em [9] found that Cambodian students were not fully ready for their Google Classroom, a modern language teaching tool. Sey [10] continued that students' attitudes and perceptions toward using Zoom were low.

Understanding effective instructors' important qualities or characteristics, especially those teaching English as a foreign language (TEFL), is relevant to better recruitment and development of effective TEFL instructors for university teaching and learning in Cambodia. Teaching evaluation using student ratings or feedback is more reliable, valid, and valuable as students are direct recipients of knowledge and experience from their TEFL instructors. While there is still a lack of studies on effective TEFL instructors at the Cambodian HEIs, this study uses a student survey asking students to rate their instructor teaching effectiveness. The study aimed to examine students' perceptions of effective TEFL instructors in five domains: qualifications, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and personal and interpersonal characteristics.

This section describes certain qualities or characteristics that instructors must have for their teaching. These qualities include qualifications, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and personal and interpersonal characteristics. Teaching and learning may be meaningless or unsuccessful without such qualities or characteristics.

A teaching qualification here means a certain level of education and training an instructor obtains from post-secondary education institutions. Nevertheless, it is a degree in a specific field of study, including a Bachelor, Master, or Doctoral degree, with the latter two degrees regarded as advanced degrees that an instructor holds for a teaching

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profession. It could mean that the higher degree of education and training an instructor has, the higher or better students will achieve in their learning [11], [12]. It simply means instructors receive profound knowledge and skills throughout advanced learning degrees.

According to Shulman [13], pedagogical content knowledge (PCK) is “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.” In other words, it refers to how teachers interpret and transforms their subject-matter knowledge to deal with or facilitate student learning [14]. It is a distinctive body of professional knowledge that teachers must possess for successful teaching [13], [14]. PCK is viewed on a continuum, with educators acquiring more through appropriate training and experience. Educators acquire it before, during pre-service training, and in their teaching careers.

Instructors must also understand the subject matter deeply and flexibly to help students create useful cognitive maps, relate one idea to another, and address their misconceptions [13]. Based on Shulman's theoretical framework, instructors must master two types of knowledge: (a) content, also known as deep knowledge of the subject itself, and (b) knowledge of curricular development. Content knowledge encompasses what Engelmann and Carnine [15] called the structure of knowledge—the theories, principles, and concepts of a particular discipline. More importantly, content knowledge deals with the teaching process, including the most valuable forms of representing and communicating content and how students best learn a subject's specific concepts and topics.

Characteristics of TEFL instructors are critical aspects of successful teaching and learning. For instance, Park and Lee [16] investigated the characteristics of effective TEFL instructors in high schools in Korea using a self-report questionnaire focusing on English proficiency, pedagogical knowledge, and socio-affective skills. Their findings showed students' higher endorsement of pedagogical knowledge over English proficiency and socio-affective skills. It implies that instructors should be conversant with L2 acquisition theories, teaching methods, and testing to help their students learn English effectively. Successful teaching and learning depend on the interpersonal skills or personalities of the instructors. Students ranked TEFL instructors' traits, such as enthusiasm, creativity, and fairness in their judgments, as more significant than pedagogical abilities, such as error correction strategies, use of technology, proficiency in instructing language skills, and classroom management [17]. These findings align with research [18], which found that being approachable and giving students positive feedback were the essential traits of a successful TEFL instructor. In order to foster healthy interactions between students and teachers, teachers must provide a comfortable learning atmosphere [19].

Pettis [20] pointed out that professionally competent English instructors are profoundly knowledgeable in a language, which aligns with the findings of Park and Lee [16]. In a study conducted concurrently with the one mentioned above, Shishavan and Sadeghi [21] found that students believed that a successful language teacher should be able to teach English using the learners' native language. While instructors must be proficient in the target language, precise pedagogical understanding, and the capacity to employ

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particular strategies and approaches were crucial, students favored instructors with an optimistic outlook [22]. Moreover, Petraki and Khat [23] added that ESP courses had many challenges and constraints for students.

Regarding teaching methods, the study conducted by Sajjad [24] revealed that most students rated the lecture method as the best teaching method but rather suitable for large class sizes. Reasons could be that instructors provide all knowledge related to topics, which is a time-saving method, and students listen to lectures attentively and take notes. The group discussion was rated as the second-best method of teaching that induces more participation of students, makes learning more effective, reduces dependency on teacher roles, and develops creativity among students. Based on students' perceptions and ratings, an effective teaching method improves teaching and learning.

## **2. METHOD**

This study employed a survey design to collect quantitative data on students' perceptions of effective TEFL instructors in Cambodian higher education institutions. This study's structured questionnaire was designed using a 5-point Likert scale consisting of Strongly Disagree (SD) to Strongly Agree (SA). It contains 49 items separated into five sections, including instructors' qualifications (4 items), content knowledge (8 items), pedagogical knowledge (10 items), pedagogical skills (14 items), and personal and interpersonal characteristics (13 items)

This study used a random cluster technique. According to Krejcie and Morgan [25], the random cluster is "the process of selecting groups, not individuals" [26], allowing the researcher to select 3 out of all the universities participating in the mock institutional accreditation from the Accreditation Committee of Cambodia (ACC) in 2017. The selected universities must also meet the following criteria: (1) they have operated for at least ten years and (2) currently have year-four students majoring in Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL). Based on this random cluster, 265 year-4 TEFL students were selected from the selected universities located in Phnom Penh.

As in the COVID-19 pandemic, the researcher decided to design the questionnaire using a Google form platform to collect the quantitative data. The Google form link was sent to TEFL program administrators so they could send it to their students via chat groups. Moreover, two questionnaire versions of English and Khmer were used to ensure all the respondents could understand and provide answers that reflected their beliefs, thoughts, and feelings about the characteristics and qualities of effective TEFL instructors.

This study used descriptive statistics (percentages, frequencies, graphs, and tables) to present the research findings based on students' perceptions of effective TEFL instructors. The data analysis covered the five main criteria or categories included in the questionnaire. However, only certain items of each category were selected to present the key findings, given their significance for answering the research question in this paper.

## **3. RESULTS**

The following section presents key findings of students' perception of the qualities and characteristics of an effective English language instructor using selected elements of

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the following criteria: instructor qualifications, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and personal and interpersonal characteristics.

### 3.1. Students' Perception of Instructors' Qualifications

Figure 1 shows percentages of students' perceptions of instructors' qualification levels. The results indicate that 91% of the students agree and strongly agree that effective English language instructors should graduate with a Master's degree in an English-related major to teach Bachelor's students. In comparison, 36% of the students agree, and 50% strongly agree that effective English language instructors should have a Doctoral degree to teach Bachelor's and Master's degrees. Furthermore, 56% of the students agree and strongly agree that effective English language instructors should hold a Master's degree in an English-related major to teach a Bachelor's and Master's degree class. These findings point out that the higher level of the instructor's qualification, is more positive perception students have towards instructors' qualifications in effective teaching. Moreover, the results seem to suggest that instructors teaching English at the same level as their qualification are not valued much by most students, with the results that show that only 37% of students agree and 6% strongly agree that instructors should graduate with a bachelor's degree of an English-related major to teach a bachelor's degree program.

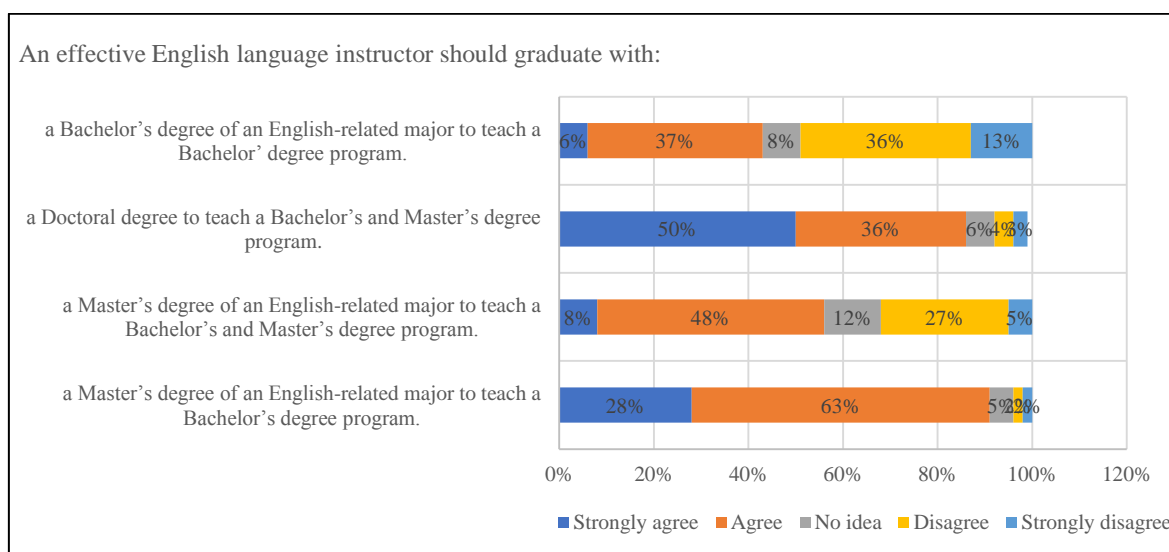


Figure 1. Students' perception of instructors' qualification levels

Note: Some items in the graphs do not have a total sum of 100% due to missing answers.

Source: Author's calculation

### 3.2. Students' Perception of Instructors' content knowledge

Instructors' content knowledge is key to teaching any subject at university. As expected, most students agree and strongly agree with the statements, as shown in Figure 2. For instance, the results show that 52% of the students agree and 42% strongly agree that effective English language instructors should be fluent in the English language, while 58% of the students agree and 29% strongly agree that effective English language instructors should have good knowledge of all English features. The results also indicate

that 60% of the students agree and 28% strongly agree that effective English language instructors should be familiar with language learning theories. About 57% of the students agree and 36% strongly agree that effective English language instructors should have broad English language vocabulary, while 92% agree and strongly agree that effective English language instructors should have sound knowledge of English grammar.

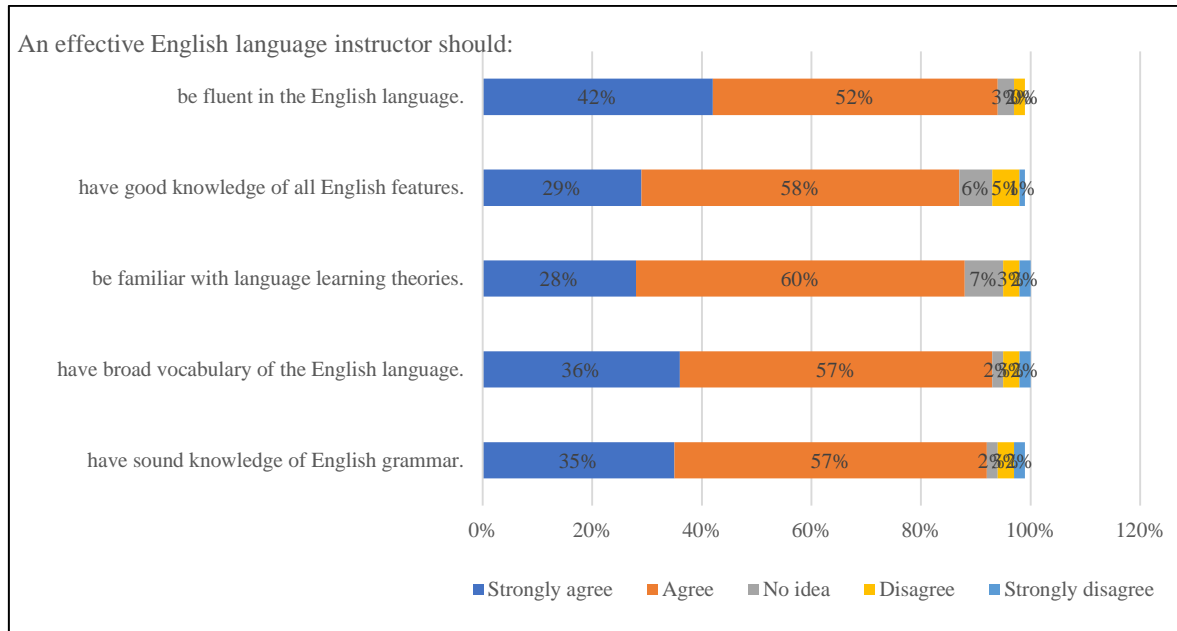


Figure 2. Students' perception of instructors' content knowledge

Note: Some items in the graphs do not have a total sum of 100% due to missing answers.

Source: Author's calculation

### 3.3. Students' perception of instructors' pedagogical knowledge

Figure 3 shows percentages of students' perceptions of instructors' pedagogical knowledge elements. Most students perceive their instructors' pedagogical knowledge positively, as the figure below indicates. For example, 56% of the surveyed students agree, and 37% strongly agree that instructors should be knowledgeable about their subject matter of teaching. About 60% of students agree, and 36% strongly agree on instructors' high flexibility and adaptation in lessons as needed. Effective English language instructors must be knowledgeable about strategies for evaluating students' understanding based on students' perceptions, as about 94% of the student respondent agree with this statement. Also, 64% of students agree, and only 20% strongly agree that instructors should be knowledgeable about target students while teaching English. There are also higher percentages of the respondents agreeing (58%) and strongly agreeing (38%) with instructors' high knowledge about teaching and learning techniques and/or methods used in the classroom. A high proportion of students (96%) agree and strongly agree that effective English language instructors should make content relevant to students, while instructors should also be knowledgeable about the nature of the target audience or

students. Based on these statistics, students see the importance of instructors' pedagogical knowledge by rating each element in the figure highly.

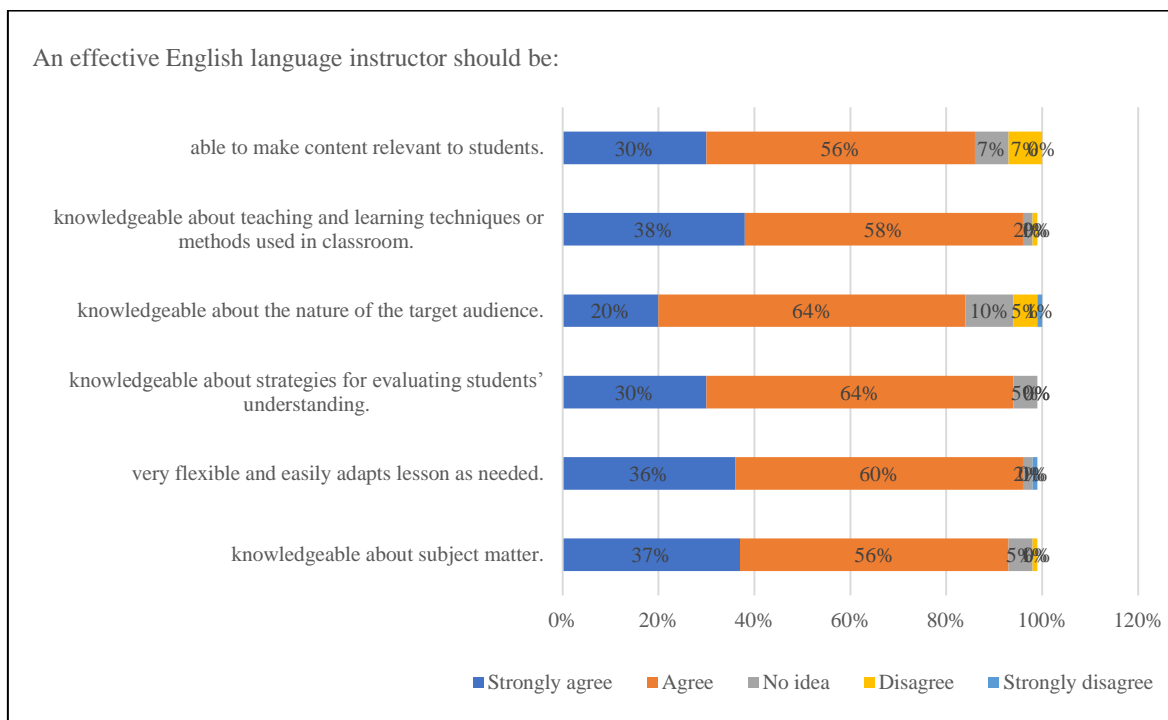


Figure 3. Students' perception of instructors' pedagogical knowledge

Note: Some items in the graphs do not have a total sum of 100% due to missing answers.

Source: Author's calculation

### 3.4. Students' Perception of Instructors' pedagogical skills

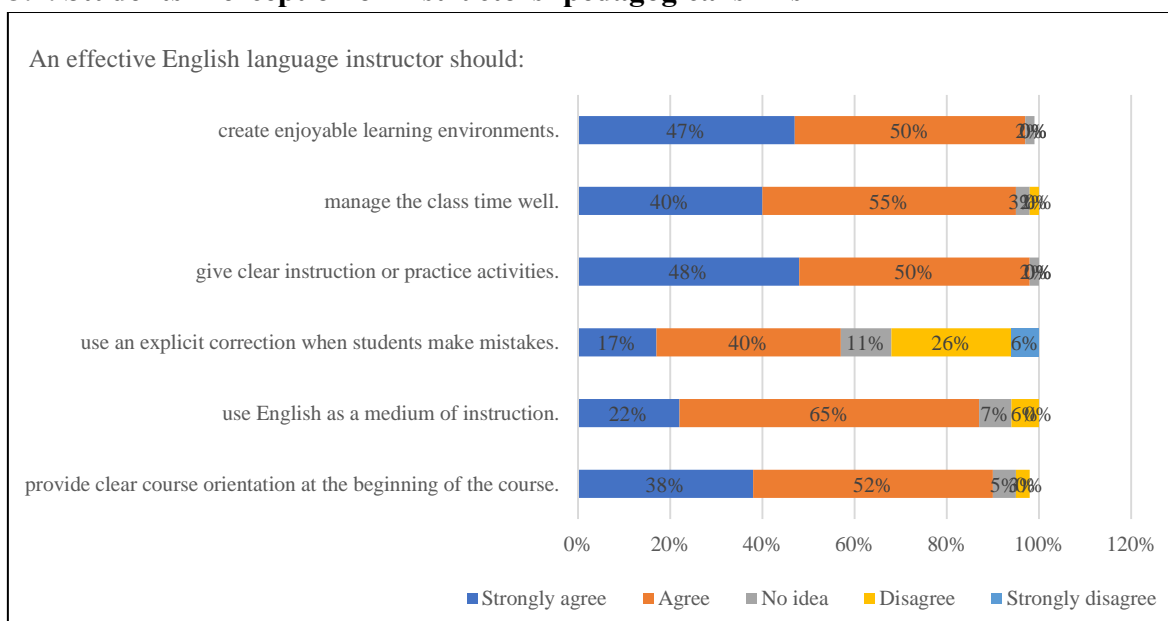


Figure 4. Students' perception of instructors' pedagogical skills

Note: Some items in the graphs do not have a total sum of 100% due to missing answers.

Source: Author's calculation

Most elements of instructors' pedagogical skills indicated by Figure 4 are rated at more than 90%, except for two items rated less than 90%. Specifically, the results show 98% of students agree and strongly agree that effective English instructors should give more straightforward instruction or practice activities, followed by 97% of students agreeing and strongly agreeing that instructors should create enjoyable learning environments and another 95% viewing that instructors should manage the class time well. Interestingly, 93% of students also agree and strongly agree with instructors' provision of more precise orientation at the beginning of the course, while 87% agree and strongly agree that instructors should use English as a medium of instruction.

### 3.5. Students' Perceptions of Instructors' Personal and interpersonal characteristics

Instructors' personal and interpersonal characteristics are essential elements in teaching and learning. All the elements in Figure 5 are rated at least 90%, reflecting that most students value instructors' personal and interpersonal characteristics. For example, the results show that 53% of the students agree and 42% strongly agree that an effective English language instructor should be patient, while 41% agree and 56% strongly agree that an effective English language instructor should be open-minded. Moreover, 39% of the students agree, 58% strongly agree that an effective English language instructor should be fair, 62% agree, and 34% strongly agree that an effective English language instructor should be approachable to students. Instructors should be motivating, as 36% of respondents agree and 61% strongly agree. The descriptive results also show that 48% of the students agree and 47% strongly agree that an effective English language instructor should be hard working. Also, about 91% of the students agree and strongly agree that instructors should be experienced in teaching. Based on these results, all instructors should have these characteristics to teach students effectively.

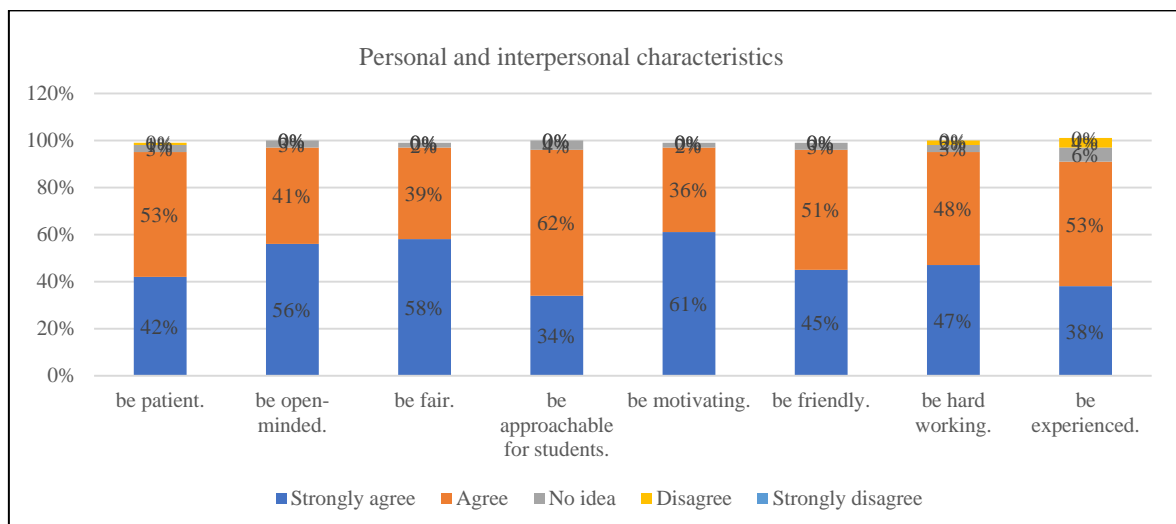


Figure 5. Students' perception of instructors' personal and interpersonal characteristics

Note: Some items in the graphs do not have a total sum of 100% due to missing answers.

Source: Author's calculation

#### 4. DISCUSSION

As the results show above, students perceive the selected elements of the five major criteria of effective English instructors' qualities and characteristics positively. The results are consistent with previous studies. The findings of this study confirm those of the studies of Dial [12] and Hill et al. [11] that instructors with advanced agree or studies have students with better learning outcomes. Regarding instructors' content knowledge, the study's results also align with the findings of the seminal article by Shulman [13], stressing instructors' knowledge of the subject matter. The study also indicates the same results as those of Brosh [27] study showing that the knowledge of a language is a crucial factor in characterizing an effective TEFL instructor, while the mastery of subject matter plays a key role in instructors' effective teaching [28], [29] and [30]. The results of this study also align with those of Sajjad [24] and Park [16] studied with respect to instructors' pedagogical knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the study shows consistent results with those of Arikan [17], [18], and Nalan [19] studies in respect of instructors' personal qualities and characteristics playing a crucial role in ensuring and enhancing a smooth and conducive student-instructor relationship and interaction.

#### 5. CONCLUSION

The study reveals higher percentages of students' positive perceptions of effective TEFL instructors' qualifications, content knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, pedagogical skills, and personal and interpersonal characteristics. Students highly value TEFL instructors with these qualities and characteristics. These should be must-have criteria for TEFL instructors in higher education. The results also strongly suggest that every educational institution should create concrete criteria for selecting qualified university instructors. The findings can help institutions to develop human resources with these quality aspects or elements in selecting effective English language instructors. Therefore, higher education institutions can use the criteria of effective TEFL instructors based on the results of this study.

In contrast, TEFL instructors must develop or improve themselves to have these qualities and other attributes regarding effective teaching and learning in Cambodia. The study also has some limitations regarding the small sample sizes of the participating universities and respondents, while the questionnaire has not been able to include many other aspects of effective TEFL instructors in the study. Therefore, further studies may identify other essential aspects of effective instructors in general and at the secondary education level or below.

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