

## **Student Voice Contribution in Determining the ‘Effective English Language Teacher’: A Collective Case Study as a Concept Paper**

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### **Abstract**

*Instructional and personal qualities of the ‘effective English language teacher’ expounded by English language experts still surprisingly produced average English language proficiency in a majority of Malaysian students, instead of the targeted excellent. Therefore, this concept paper aimed to find out the extent to which student voice: agreed with expert opinion in its description of both the instructional qualities and personal qualities of the ‘effective English language teacher,’ tallied with expert opinion when suggesting how the English language teacher/lecturer could have been a more ‘effective’ teacher/lecturer, as well as through its student psychology sanctioned expert opinion on the developmental psychology of children, adolescents and of adults, in its description of how it deemed the English language teacher/lecturer ‘effective.’ In short, student voice in this concept paper is invaluable as an add-on to the current store of expert knowledge of what it takes to be a truly ‘effective English language teacher.’*

**Keywords:** student voice, ‘effective English Language teacher,’ instructional qualities, personal qualities, expert opinion, developmental psychology

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Statement of the Problem**

To date, experts of the English language have expounded all that needs to be known of the types of instructional and personal qualities the ‘effective English language teacher’ is expected to have, as a perfect reference for all those teaching the language. Therefore, such knowledge in those teachers are then assumed to automatically be utilised by them to help every child master the English language, from primary education to secondary education right up till the tertiary stage. Nevertheless, the English language proficiency level of a majority of Malaysian students is still very much on the average, instead of being the targeted excellent, seen in the Table 1, where in Institute of Teacher Education Y, the three English language lecturers, besides having been trained to teach English, have been stringently selected from schools to serve in the said institute; while the undergraduate trainee teachers of the aforementioned institute were among the best selected post-*Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia* students throughout the country to follow the newly introduced degree programme in institute of teacher educations nationwide.

In this respect, the question is not on the number of undergraduate trainee teachers who have passed the English language proficiency paper which tested their listening, speaking, reading, writing and grammar skills - but rather, on how many of them have scored excellently in it.

Thus, in the example of Institute of Teacher Education Y's (ITE Y's) a hundred and sixteen undergraduate trainee teachers, only thirteen had outshone their counterparts - which asks why in spite of being under the expertise of the English language lecturers, the majority of undergraduate trainee teachers still have fallen short of excelling in English. Moreover, as English cannot be mastered overnight, it can be safely assumed that the English language mastery of these undergraduate trainee teachers may equally not have been as outstanding as their mastery of their other academic subjects in both primary and secondary school, despite their having been under the tutelage of teachers who had taught them English throughout these school years of at least ten to eleven years.

Therefore, the problem which arises is - English language teachers in primary and secondary schools, as well as English language lecturers in institute of teacher educations are well-trained in the subject they teach, have all the input from English language experts worldwide on how to become 'effective' in terms of instructional and personal qualities - and yet, the majority of some of the best Malaysian students in general represented by the sample in Institute of Teacher Education Y above still fail to excel in English.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

This study attempts to answer the following research questions:

- (1) To what extent does student voice agree with the description by expert opinion on the instructional qualities of the 'effective English language teacher'?
- (2) To what magnitude does student voice agree with the description by expert opinion on the instructional qualities of the 'effective English language teacher'?
- (3) To what degree does student voice, when suggesting how the English language teacher/lecturer could have been a more 'effective' teacher/lecturer, tally with expert opinion on both the instructional and personal qualities of the 'effective English language teacher'?
- (4) To what scope does the developmental psychology of student voice on how it deems the English language teacher/lecturer 'effective,' tally with expert opinion on the developmental psychology of children, adolescents and of adults?

## **2. Review of Related Literature**

### **2.1 The Developmental Psychology Of Children**

The developmental psychology of children refers to John Bowlby's attachment theory later expanded by Mary Ainsworth advocating that the earliest connections between children and their caregivers impact them at that point in time, and continues throughout their life; and children who are securely attached to their adult caregivers, when separated from them, exhibit minimal distress - for they are confident their caregivers will come back to them (as cited in Van Wagner, 2009). Yet, studies by Al-Yagon and Mikulincer (2006) discovered that even children who are securely attached to others may still be insecurely attached to a teacher, as a result of the relationship with a particular teacher; while children known to be insecure towards others can still become attached to the teacher, as a consequence of the particular teacher's ability to enhance their feelings of security, like being available to the children or accepting them as they are. Moreover, research by Pianta as well as Pianta and Steinberg found children to sport less behavioral problems and were more competent socially, besides being better school adjusted, when they had better relationships with teachers and vice versa; similarly, studies by Ladd discovered such students to be more academically inclined too (as cited in Association for Childhood Education International, 2002). Therefore, since teachers are adult figures who impact children's lives to quite an extent, the researcher is keen to discover how far the three primary school pupils as research participants have found their English language teachers to have effectively taken appropriate measures to help develop them as learners into emotionally and psychologically balanced individuals.

Nevertheless, the developmental psychology of children involves Piaget's concrete operational stage too, in which children start to form concepts in their mind that logically explain their physical experiences, whereby they would be able to reason abstractly and problem solve too, such as solving arithmetic equations with numbers and not merely with objects (as cited in Russell, 1999). Thus, the researcher is keen to investigate how far the three primary school pupils as research participants in this study are also able to logically put forth their respective descriptions of the 'effective English language teacher.'

## **2.2 The Developmental Psychology of Adolescents and of Adults**

Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development revolving round adolescence and young adulthood is also referred to, with regard to the developmental psychology of adolescents and of adults. In this respect, adolescence is when the individual has to achieve ego identity, which is knowing oneself and therefore avoiding role confusion by knowing one's place in society - and in order for that to happen, there ought to be a culture of exemplary adults who communicate openly, hence deserve the adolescent's respect (as cited in Boeree, 1997, 2006). Furthermore, research by Marquez-Zenkov, Harmon, van Lier and Marquez-Zenkov (2007) found urban youths needing their teachers to realise that the former's parents are not their main supports in their lives, and that these young adults actually yearn for their teachers to be part of their lives through the teachers' roles as coaches, directors of plays as well as counsellors. Thus, the researcher is keen to find out how far the three secondary school students as research participants have found the English language teacher to effectively work on ways that could 'reach out' to them, so as to earn their respect.

Moreover, young adulthood which follows adolescence is the stage where, according to Erikson, the individual's challenge would be to have a committed relationship with another person (as cited in Gale, 1998) that involves raising a family in a healthy adult relationship (as cited in Chapman, 2006-2008) based on a strong sense of personal identity needed to develop intimate relationships (as cited in Van Wagner, 2008) - although one may tend not to naturally develop intimate relationships with the opposite sex as a result of career emphasis that instead would require one to move from place to place in search of better job prospects, besides living alone in the urban world that is generally impersonal (as cited in Boeree, 1997, 2006). Therefore, the researcher is keen to investigate how far the three undergraduate trainee teachers as research participants, have found the English language lecturer to have effectively understood them as young adults struggling to develop healthy intimacies - or working towards building a teaching career.

Yet, the developmental psychology of adolescents and of adults also takes into account Piaget's formal operational stage which involves adolescents and those older no longer depending on the concrete when engaging in more reflective reasoning (as cited in Russell, 1999). Therefore, the researcher is just as interested to find out if the research participants represented by the three secondary school students and the three young adult undergraduate trainee teachers, have a particular belief or can self-reflect on their idea of the 'effective English language teacher.'

In summary, Erikson believes in 'mutuality' which is the interaction of generations, where if Sigmund Freud had defined how parents greatly influenced a child's development, Erikson also added that children too influenced parental development (as cited in Boeree, 1997, 2006). Hence, such reciprocal influence propagated by Erikson is exactly what the researcher is trying to investigate through student voice on the 'effective English language teacher,' so that such student voice could also aid English language teachers in improving towards becoming in the actual sense - truly 'effective.'

## **2.3 Some Findings Regarding Age and the Tendency of Thought for Children, Adolescents and Young Adults**

Pertaining to teacher dependency, Montesinos, Lacruz and Koskinen (2004) found younger students to be receptive of very structured knowledge under teachers who give instructions and control them; while more mature students who are more involved in teamwork proposals, discussions and debates where they are more able to learn from one another's opinions - now find the teacher to be more of an advisor who helps them assimilate their knowledge. Nevertheless, magnetic resonance imaging (MRI), a technology which utilises strong magnets to take pictures of parts of the body has made clear observations that normal adolescents' pre-frontal cortex of developing brains is not complete until only the mid-twenties, and this goes to further explain how adolescent student minds have a limited capacity for abstract thinking, if not making truly mature judgment ("Maturation," 2005). Hence, the researcher is keen to analyse the thinking of the research participants represented by children, adolescents and young adults on how they would describe the 'effective English language teacher,' to confirm if there really is a link between age and the tendency of thought with what that has been discovered by earlier research.

#### 2.4 Perception of Experts on the ‘Effective English Language Teacher’

The ‘effective English language teacher’ has been expounded far and wide by experts of the English language, usually adults, who have had a lot of experience in the teaching of the language, besides being very well-versed in the theories and rules in conducting English lessons well. Thus, some of the perceptions of experts on the ‘effective’ *English language teacher* are presented as follows:

From his observations as a supervisor of qualified teachers, Westwood (1995) challenged that in order to be ‘effective,’ the English language teacher would sometimes need to directly teach new knowledge and skills that may actually facilitate the student’s process of deciphering what is taught - because the failure of the teacher to teach effectively would result in not only the student’s confidence loss in grasping the area taught as well as the student’s lack of self-esteem - but would also demotivate the student from learning the subject.

Another view comes from an experienced teacher trainer, Hart (2007), who posited that the good English language teacher is not only one who is academically qualified and knows one’s subject matter well, but also one who is capable of tailoring one’s material to suit student needs; thus motivating them to learn - besides being capable of bonding well with students, and consequently respecting each other.

Moreover, from his experience as an English Departmental Head of a community college, editor and contributor of English journals as well as a teacher of English, Khalid Al Seghayer (2006-2007) outlined the characteristics of good English language instructors - which include not only being good in English but also being able to utilise various teaching methods, being confident of their students’ capability of learning another language, coming up with lesson plans that meet student ability and needs, creating a friendly atmosphere for students to freely express themselves without fear of being embarrassed in front of their peers when they are corrected, encouraging students to make use of their new knowledge and appreciate their efforts, treating each student equally and praising them as a form of motivation, making students aware through classroom activities that the English they use goes beyond the classroom, showing students the teacher’s own enthusiasm in teaching them English while taking interest in students’ diverse cultural backgrounds in order to help them become keener learners of the language, constantly updating themselves (the teachers) in the area of the teaching and learning of English, besides being a facilitator as well as a resource to students, rather than as an authoritative figure.

Furthermore, as an experienced foreign language teacher who has engaged in many years of observation, Vadillo (2000) advocated for English language teachers to be enthusiastic about their students, their job and the English language they teach; to be knowledgeable about their subject and to constantly improve it; to give individual help to students; to be creative and to use a variety of materials during lessons besides being skilful at handling equipment such as the blackboard, the overhead projector, videos, multimedia and so on; to support, encourage and have patience with students; to provide a warm classroom atmosphere of learning; to plan lessons ahead; to try to motivate students and to possess a humorous nature; to be able to control classroom discipline; to continue updating their knowledge of English by participating in workshops and seminars, besides reading books and journals concerned with English, as well as coordinating with fellow English teachers; and also to give positive feedback on student efforts.

Therefore, what constitutes the ‘effective English language teacher’ has never been short of anything exemplary. In this regard, Hare (1994) posited that “a deficiency of the excellences in many teachers produces poor teaching” (p. 326). In contrast, when students believe that the benefit they receive from ‘effective’ English language teachers are unobtainable elsewhere, then the said teachers are those who teach with a *differential advantage* (“Exercise Hints,” 2003).

Thence, in order to learn how to avoid falling short of ‘effective’ teaching especially during English lessons, English language teachers must first realise that their teaching effectiveness is being scrutinised by their students who frequently come into contact with them. In line with this, Cullingford (1995) emphasised the fact that students are able to detect, as well as to analyse not only English language teachers’ personalities, but also how far the said teachers have accepted their professional role - where part of this professional role mentioned is, being confident enough to teach what students may learn - as pointed out by Farmer (2006) and Garcia (1991).

Therefore, the task of meeting the objectives of the lesson, making the lesson interesting, as well as challenging students intellectually is a norm for 'effective' English language teachers - for those teachers need to be multitalented, if not versatile (Cruikshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf, 2003), in that they would need to develop a repertoire of 'effective' pedagogical strategies (Anderson, 1989) that are normally those that are best adopted from theory into practice (Mohd. Azam Nair, 2000).

In short, expert opinion has hinted that English language teachers would have to work at various qualities deemed 'effective', in order to earn the description as 'effective' English language teachers. Thus, the aforementioned qualities of the 'effective English language teacher' seen from the viewpoint of expert opinion can be said to also fall into two categories (1) Instructional Qualities of the 'Effective English Language Teacher,' and (2) Personal Qualities of the 'Effective English Language Teacher' - together with their respective thematic headings as follows:

- (1) Instructional Qualities of the 'Effective English Language Teacher'
  - (a) Being Competent to Teach English
  - (b) Planning Lessons
  - (c) Carrying Out Teacher-Centred Teaching or Facilitating
  - (d) Bringing Creativity to the Classroom
  - (e) Teaching English Words in Context or Directly Giving the Meaning of English Words
  - (f) Making Use of Computer Technology to Teach
  - (g) Incorporating Beyond Classroom Learning
  - (h) Being Flexible
  - (i) Exercising Clarity
  - (j) Using the Best Voice and Using the Best Voice Speed
  - (k) Using Direct Eye Contact
  - (l) Moving Around in the Class Appropriately
  - (m) Being a Good Performer
  - (n) Allocating Homework and Class Work Accordingly
  - (o) Giving Feedback on Students' Work
  - (p) Extending Academic Help to Students
  - (q) Reflecting on Lessons
  - (r) Refusing to Stop Learning
- (2) Personal Qualities of the 'Effective English Language Teacher'
  - (a) Avoiding Student Favouritism
  - (b) Maintaining a Good Teacher-Student Relationship
  - (c) Maintaining Humour
  - (d) Managing Student Behaviour
  - (e) Believing in the Potential of Students and Inspiring Them On

## **2.5 The Theoretical Framework of the Study**

The theoretical framework of the study represented by Figure 1 - is intended to visually demonstrate how certain theories by Bowlby and Ainsworth, as well as by Erikson and Piaget support the reasons behind how children, adolescents and young adults may think - whereby such thinking represents the contribution of how far student voice agrees, refutes, or adds on to expert opinion on the existing instructional qualities and personal qualities of the 'effective English language teacher.' In this regard, the instructional qualities concerned are based on the 'aptitude' and 'proficiency' of the 'effective English language teacher' backed by Carroll (1982), Stern and Gardner (as cited in López Rúa, 2006), as well as Farhady, Jafarpoor and Birjandi (as cited in Ataollah Maleki & Ebrahim Zangani, 2007), Rossiter (2003) and Gardner (2001); while the personal qualities mentioned equally revolve round the 'attitude' and 'motivation' of the 'effective English language teacher,' supported by Hubbard (2008), Baloto (1996), Maslow (as cited in Cooper & Simonds, 1999), Haberman (2004), and Gardner (2001).

### **3. The Research Methodology**

#### **3.1 The Research Design**

The research design for this particular study will be that of a collective case study involving student voice contribution from three research participants respectively from a primary school in the Kedah State, a secondary school in the Kedah State as well as an institute of teacher education in the Penang State - on the 'effective English language teacher.' Hence, by means of a collective case study, the researcher will be interested to find out if certain generalisations could be made through student voice coming from children in the primary school, adolescents in the secondary school, and young adults in the institute of teacher education - regarding their description of the 'effective English language teacher' - which is to complement expert opinion on the matter.

#### **3.2 The Sampling of Research Participants**

Purposive sampling will be the researcher's sampling choice of study participants, whereby such criteria-based non-random sampling will involve research participants of above average, average, and below average English language proficiency based on the recommendations of their English language teachers/lecturers - and who are total strangers to the researcher, in order for the said research participants to freely provide in-depth information on their respective responses on the 'effective English language teacher.'

#### **3.3 Data Collection**

The researcher will utilise the interview of twenty-eight semi-structured interview questions respectively for the *child*, *adolescent*, and *young adult* categories on issues expounded by expert opinion in the literature review based on the thematic headings (1) Instructional Qualities of the 'Effective English Language Teacher' (a – r), and (2) Personal Qualities of the 'Effective English Language Teacher' (a – e), after those questions having been scrutinised by three English language experts who have had experience not only teaching the English language, but also setting and marking English examination papers in the primary school, the secondary school and the institute of teacher education as well.

However, prior to the actual interview, estimated to be an hour long, being carried out on the three research participants from a primary school, a secondary school and an institute of teacher education respectively, a pilot test of the interview will be run by the researcher on three individuals studying in the Kedah State who are not part of the actual research participants of the study so as to increase the chances of success of the impending actual research to be carried out.

Thus, it is after any necessary amendments to the pilot study carried out having been made that the researcher will next get the proposal of the study approved by the university board. Nevertheless, before the interviews proper can be carried out on the actual research participants, the researcher will have to firstly go about obtaining formal written permission from the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD) in order to collect data for research purposes from any educational institute in the country; from the Teacher Education Division (TED) to collect data from three undergraduate trainee teachers of a teacher training institute in the Penang State with the consent of its Director; as well as from the Kedah State Education Department, so as to convince the targeted Heads of primary and secondary schools in the Kedah State to allow the researcher to interview the three primary school pupils and the three secondary school students concerned. Therefore, once having gained entry into the chosen primary school, secondary school and institute of teacher education, the researcher as a qualitative researcher will have to next obtain informed consent from each of the research participants so as get their maximum participation in the study, informing them how they could contribute to it, besides convincing them that whatever they disclosed to the researcher would never jeopardise their status as pupils/students/undergraduate trainee teachers in any way, as their names would never be revealed in the final written thesis.

### 3.4 The Data Analysis

To analyse qualitative data for the study in order to observe how far the four research questions have been answered, the researcher will compare the responses of each of the nine research participants towards all twenty-eight semi-structured interview questions that were arranged under four categories together with their respective thematic headings as found in the literature review: (1) *Student Voice on Instructional Qualities of the 'Effective English Language Teacher'* (2) *Student Voice on Personal Qualities of the 'Effective English Language Teacher'* and (3) *Student Voice Suggestions on How English Language Teachers/Lecturers Could Have Been More 'Effective' Teachers/Lecturers* - in order to find out how far those responses representing student voice on the 'effective English language teacher' tally with expert opinion in the literature review; as well as (4) *Student Voice on the 'Effective English Language Teacher' Based on the Developmental Psychology of Children, Adolescents and of Adults* – to equally discover how far the developmental psychology of student voice on the 'effective English language teacher' compares to the developmental psychology of children, adolescents and of adults expounded in the literature.

Moreover, student voice of the nine research participants will be analysed through a triangulation technique, in that all nine contributions pertain to the same topic; firstly, the instructional qualities of the English language teacher/lecturer student voice deems 'effective'; secondly, the personal qualities of the English language teacher/lecturer student voice considers 'effective'; thirdly, student voice suggestions concerning how English language teachers/lecturers could have been more 'effective' teachers/lecturers; and fourthly, the developmental psychology of student voice regarding the 'effective English language teacher.' At the same time, the responses of all nine participants for each of the four topics will also be triangulated with similar findings in the literature. However, it is the intention of the researcher for all new data from the data collection not found in the literature review to become new discoveries on the interpretation of the 'effective English language teacher.'

### 3.5 The Report on the Findings

In order to write a report on the research findings, the researcher will have to decipher the pertinent messages in the voices of the nine research participants through data from the data analysis section, in order to discuss the implications of student voice contribution in determining the 'effective English language teacher' based on the actual needs of pupils/students/undergraduate trainee teachers who learn English.

## 4. Conclusion

The ultimate goal of this study is to delve into the minds of pupils, students and undergraduate trainee teachers which provides a rare opportunity for the researcher to seek the missing link as to what is really expected by student voice of the 'effective English language teacher' as its contribution to existing expert opinion on the matter, for it would finally serve as a more thorough reference for all interested parties – educators and learners alike - that may make the teaching and learning of the English language as successful as it ought to be.

**Table 1: The Comparison of English Language Proficiency II Grades Among First Year Undergraduate Trainee Teachers in Their Second Semester of Institute of Teacher Education Y in Kedah**

English language lecturer	Year 1 Sem 2 Class	No. of undergraduate trainee teachers	English Language Proficiency II Grades								
			D+	C-	C	C+	B-	B	B+	A-	A
			Weak			Average			Good		Very Good
Lecturer 1	A	19	1	2	4	4	1	5	2	0	0
Lecturer 2	B	20	0	0	2	6	8	4	0	0	0
Lecturer 3	C	21	0	1	8	6	6	0	0	0	0
Lecturer 4	D	20	0	3	1	4	6	6	0	0	0
Lecturer 5	E	18	0	0	0	0	2	11	5	0	0
Lecturer 4	F	18	1	0	2	3	4	2	2	3	1
Total no. of undergraduate trainee teachers		116	2	6	17	23	27	28	9	3	1

Note. Adapted from ITE Y's Examinations Unit (November 2008).

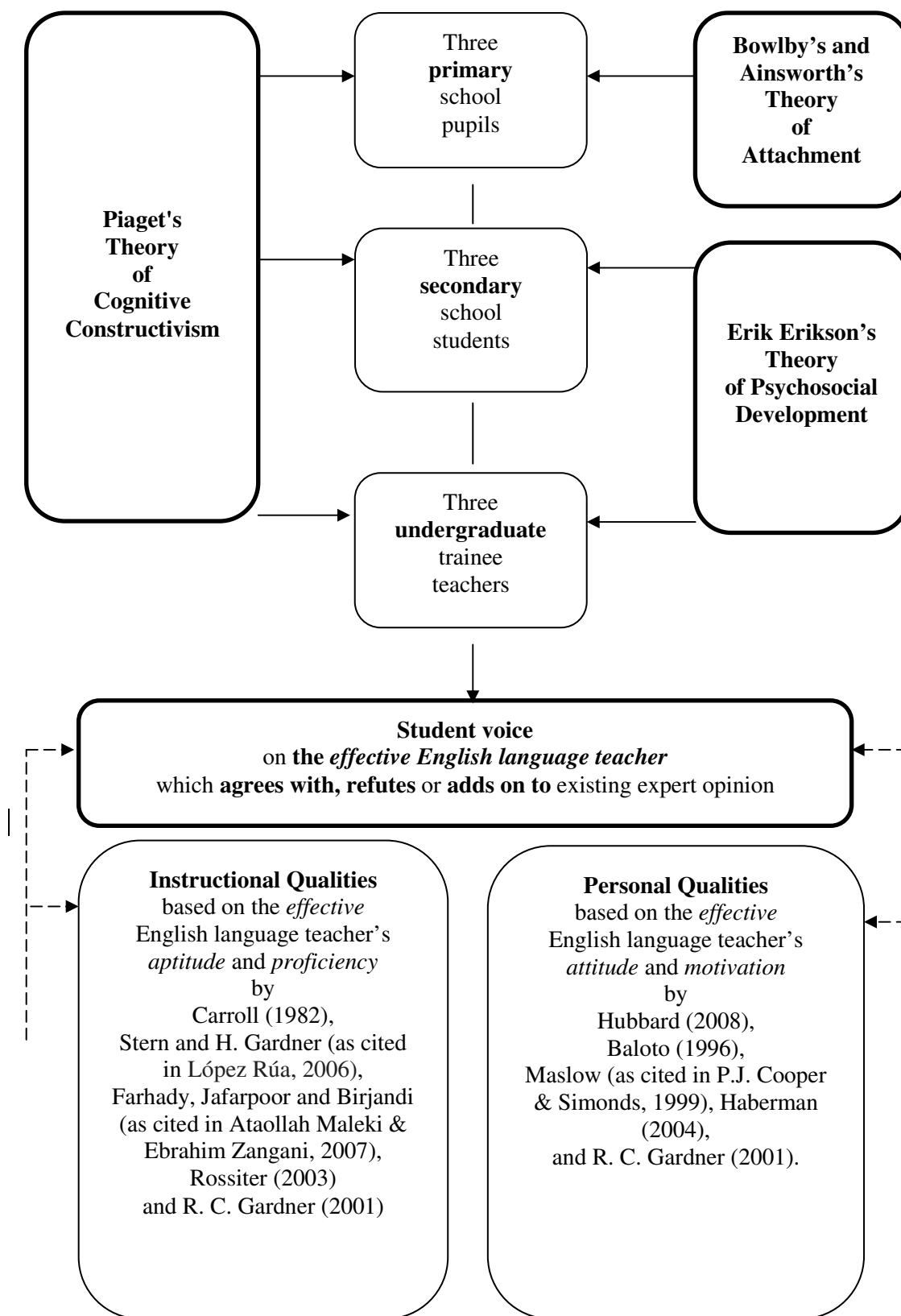


Figure 1: The theoretical framework of the study



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