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Describing good teachers

Most people can look back at their own schooldays and identify teachers they thought were good. But generally they find it quite hard to say *why* certain teachers struck them as special. Perhaps it was because of their personality. Possibly it was because they had interesting things to say. Maybe the reason was that they looked as if they loved their job, or perhaps their interest in their students' progress was compelling. Sometimes, it seems, it was just because the teacher was a fascinating person!

One of the reasons that it is difficult to give general descriptions of good teachers is that different teachers are often successful in different ways. Some teachers are more extrovert or introvert than others, for example, and different teachers have different strengths and weaknesses. A lot will depend, too, on how students view individual teachers and here again, not all students will share the same opinions.

It is often said that 'good teachers are born, not made' and it does seem that some people have a natural affinity for the job. But there are also others, perhaps, who do not have what appears to be a natural gift but who are still effective and popular teachers. Such teachers learn their craft through a mixture of personality, intelligence, knowledge and experience (and how they reflect on it). And even some of the teachers who are apparently 'born teachers' weren't like that at the beginning at all, but grew into the role as they learnt their craft.

Teaching is not an easy job, but it is a necessary one, and can be very rewarding when we see our students' progress and know that we have helped to make it happen. It is true that some lessons and students can be difficult and stressful at times, but it is also worth remembering that at its best teaching can also be extremely enjoyable.

In this chapter we will look at what is necessary for effective teaching and how that can help to provoke success – so that for both students and teachers learning English can be rewarding and enjoyable.

Who teachers are in class

When we walk into a lesson, students get an idea of who we are as a result of what we look like (how we dress, how we present ourselves) and the way we behave and react to what is

going on. They take note, either consciously or subconsciously, of whether we are always the same or whether we can be flexible, depending on what is happening at a particular point in the lesson.

As we have said, teachers, like any other group of human beings, have individual differences. However, one of the things, perhaps, that differentiates us from some other professions, is that we become different people, in a way, when we are in front of a class from the people we are in other situations, such as at home or at a party. Everyone switches roles like this in their daily lives to some extent, but for teachers, who we are (or appear to be) when we are at work is especially important.

Personality

Some years ago, in preparation for a presentation to colleagues, I recorded interviews with a large number of teachers and students. I asked them 'What makes a good teacher?' and was interested in what their instant responses would be. A number of the people I questioned answered by talking about the teacher's character. As one of them told me, 'I like the teacher who has his own personality and doesn't hide it from the students so he is not only a teacher but a person as well – and it comes through in the lesson.'

Discussing teacher personality is difficult for two reasons: in the first place there is no one ideal teacher personality. Some teachers are effective because they are 'larger than life', while others persuade through their quiet authority. But the other problem – as the respondent seemed to be saying to me in the comment above – is that students want not only to see a professional who has come to teach them, but also to glimpse the 'person as well'.

Effective teacher personality is a blend between who we really are, and who we are as teachers. In other words, teaching is much more than just 'being ourselves', however much some students want to see the real person. We have to be able to present a professional face to the students which they find both interesting and effective. When we walk into the classroom, we want them to see someone who looks like a teacher whatever else they look like. This does not mean conforming to some kind of teacher stereotype, but rather finding, each in our own way, a persona that we adopt when we cross the threshold. We need to ask ourselves what kind of personality we want our students to encounter, and the decisions we take before and during lessons should help to demonstrate that personality. This is not to suggest that we are in any way dishonest about who we are – teaching is not acting, after all – but we do need to think carefully about how we appear. One 12-year-old interviewee I talked to (see above) answered my question by saying that 'the teacher needs to have dress sense – not always the same old boring suits and ties!' However flippant this comment seems to be, it reminds us that the way we present ourselves to our students matters, whether this involves our real clothes (as in the student's comments) or the personality we 'put on' in our lessons.

Adaptability

What often marks one teacher out from another is how they react to different events in the classroom as the lesson proceeds. This is important, because however well we have prepared, the chances are that things will not go exactly to plan. Unexpected events happen in lessons and part of a teacher's skill is to decide what the response should be when they do. We will discuss such **magic moments** and unforeseen problems on page 157.

Good teachers are able to absorb the unexpected and to use it to their and the students' advantage. This is especially important when the learning outcomes we had planned for look as if they may not succeed because of what is happening. We have to be flexible enough to work with this and change our destination accordingly (if this has to be done) or find some other way to get there. Or perhaps we have to take a decision to continue what we are doing despite the interruption to the way we imagined things were going to proceed. In other words, teachers need to be able to 'think on their feet' and act quickly and decisively at various points in the lesson. When students see that they can do this, their confidence in their teachers is greatly enhanced.

Teacher roles

Part of a good teacher's art is the ability to adopt a number of different roles in the class, depending on what the students are doing. If, for example, the teacher always acts as a **controller**, standing at the front of the class, dictating everything that happens and being the focus of attention, there will be little chance for students to take much responsibility for their own learning, in other words, for them to have **agency** (see page 21). Being a controller may work for grammar explanations and other information presentation, for instance, but it is less effective for activities where students are working together cooperatively on a project, for example. In such situations we may need to be **prompters**, encouraging students, pushing them to achieve more, feeding in a bit of information or language to help them proceed. At other times, we may need to act as feedback providers (helping students to evaluate their performance) or as **assessors** (telling students how well they have done or giving them grades, etc). We also need to be able to function as a **resource** (for language information, etc) when students need to consult us and, at times, as a language **tutor** (that is, an advisor who responds to what the student is doing and advises them on what to do next).

The way we act when we are controlling a class is very different from the listening and advising behaviour we will exhibit when we are tutoring students or responding to a presentation or a piece of writing (something that is different, again, from the way we assess a piece of work). Part of our teacher personality, therefore, is our ability to perform all these roles at different times, but with the same care and ease whichever role we are involved with. This flexibility will help us to facilitate the many different stages and facets of learning.

Rapport

A significant feature in the intrinsic motivation of students (see page 20) will depend on their perception of what the teacher thinks of them, and how they are treated. It is no surprise, therefore, to find that what many people look for when they observe other people's lessons, is evidence of good **rapport** between the teacher and the class.

Rapport means, in essence, the relationship that the students have with the teacher, and vice versa. In the best lessons we will always see a positive, enjoyable and respectful relationship. Rapport is established in part when students become aware of our professionalism (see above), but it also occurs as a result of the way we listen to and treat the students in our classrooms.

Recognising students

One of the students I talked to in my research said that a good teacher was 'someone who knows our names'. This comment is revealing both literally and metaphorically. In the first place, students want teachers to know their names rather than, say, just pointing at them. But this is extremely difficult for teachers who see eight or nine groups a week. How can they remember all their students?

Teachers have developed a number of strategies to help them remember students' names. One method is to ask the students (at least in the first week or two) to put name cards on the desk in front of them or stick name badges on to their sweaters or jackets. We can also draw up a seating plan and ask students always to sit in the same place until we have learnt their names. However, this means we can't move students around when we want to, and students – especially younger students – sometimes take pleasure in sitting in the wrong place just to confuse us.

Many teachers use the register to make notes about individual students (Do they wear glasses? Are they tall?, etc) and others keep separate notes about the individuals in their classes.

There is no easy way of remembering students' names, yet it is extremely important that we do so if good rapport is to be established with individuals. We need, therefore, to find ways of doing this that suit us best.

But 'knowing our names' is also about knowing *about* students. At any age, they will be pleased when they realise that their teacher has remembered things about them, and has some understanding of who they are. Once again, this is extremely difficult in large classes, especially when we have a number of different groups, but part of a teacher's skill is to persuade students that we recognise them, and who and what they are.

Listening to students

Students respond very well to teachers who listen to them. Another respondent in my research said that 'It's important that you can talk to the teacher when you have problems and you don't get along with the subject'. Although there are many calls on a teacher's time, nevertheless we need to make ourselves as available as we can to listen to individual students.

But we need to listen properly to students in lessons too. And we need to show that we are interested in what they have to say. Of course, no one can force us to be genuinely interested in absolutely everything and everyone, but it is part of a teacher's professional personality (see page 24) that we should be able to convince students that we are listening to what they say with every sign of attention.

As far as possible we also need to listen to the students' comments on how they are getting on, and which activities and techniques they respond well or badly to. If we just go on teaching the same thing day after day without being aware of our students' reactions, it will become more and more difficult to maintain the rapport that is so important for successful classes.

Respecting students

One student I interviewed had absolutely no doubt about the key quality of good teachers. 'They should be able to correct people without offending them', he said with feeling.

Correcting students (see page 97) is always a delicate event. If we are too critical, we

risk demotivating them, yet if we are constantly praising them, we risk turning them into 'praise junkies', who begin to need approval all the time. The problem we face, however, is that while some students are happy to be corrected robustly, others need more support and positive reinforcement. In speaking activities (see Chapter 9), some students want to be corrected the moment they make any mistake, whereas others would like to be corrected later. In other words, just as students have different learning styles and intelligences, so, too, they have different preferences when it comes to being corrected. But whichever method of correction we choose, and whoever we are working with, students need to know that we are treating them with respect, and not using mockery or sarcasm – or expressing despair at their efforts!

Respect is vital, too, when we deal with any kind of problem behaviour. We could, of course, respond to indiscipline or awkwardness by being biting in our criticism of the student who has done something we do not approve of. Yet this will be counterproductive. It is the behaviour we want to criticise, not the character of the student in question.

Teachers who respect students do their best to see them in a positive light. They are not negative about their learners or in the way they deal with them in class. They do not react with anger or ridicule when students do unplanned things, but instead use a respectful professionalism to solve the problem.

Being even-handed

Most teachers have some students that they like more than others. For example, we all tend to react well to those who take part, are cheerful and cooperative, take responsibility for their own learning, and do what we ask of them without complaint. Sometimes we are less enthusiastic about those who are less forthcoming, and who find **learner autonomy**, for example, more of a challenge. Yet, as one of the students in my research said, 'a good teacher should try to draw out the quiet ones and control the more talkative ones', and one of her colleagues echoed this by saying that 'a good teacher is … someone who asks the people who don't always put their hands up'.

Students will generally respect teachers who show impartiality and who do their best to reach all the students in a group rather than just concentrating on the ones who 'always put their hands up'. The reasons that some students are not forthcoming may be many and varied, ranging from shyness to their cultural or family backgrounds. Sometimes students are reluctant to take part overtly because of other stronger characters in the group. And these quiet students will only be negatively affected when they see far more attention being paid to their more robust classmates. At the same time, giving some students more attention than others may make those students more difficult to deal with later since they will come to expect special treatment, and may take our interest as a licence to become overdominant in the classroom. Moreover, it is not just teenage students who can suffer from being the 'teacher's pet'.

Treating all students equally not only helps to establish and maintain rapport, but is also a mark of professionalism.