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.

**Teacher tasks**

Teaching doesn’t just involve the relationship we have with students, of course. As professionals we are also asked to perform certain tasks.
Preparation

Effective teachers are well-prepared. Part of this preparation resides in the knowledge they have of their subject and the skill of teaching, something we will discuss in detail on pages 30–32. But another feature of being well-prepared is having thought in advance of what we are going to do in our lessons. As we walk towards our classroom, in other words, we need to have some idea of what the students are going to achieve in the lesson; we should have some learning outcomes in our head. Of course, what happens in a lesson does not always conform to our plans for it, as we shall discuss on pages 156–157, but students always take comfort from the perception that their teacher has thought about what will be appropriate for their particular class on that particular day.

The degree to which we plan our lessons differs from teacher to teacher. It will often depend, among other things, on whether we have taught this lesson (or something like it) before. We will discuss planning in detail in Chapter 12.

Keeping records

Many teachers find the administrative features of their job (taking the register, filling forms, writing report cards) irksome, yet such record keeping is a necessary adjunct to the classroom experience.

There is one particularly good reason for keeping a record of what we have taught. It works as a way of looking back at what we have done in order to decide what to do next. And if we keep a record of how well things have gone (what has been more or less successful), we will begin to come to conclusions about what works and what doesn’t. It is important for professional teachers to try to evaluate how successful an activity has been in terms of student engagement and learning outcomes. If we do this, we will start to amend our teaching practice in the light of experience, rather than getting stuck in sterile routines. It is one of the characteristics of good teachers that they are constantly changing and developing their teaching practice as a result of reflecting on their teaching experiences.

Being reliable

Professional teachers are reliable about things like timekeeping and homework. It is very difficult to berate students for being late for lessons if we get into the habit (for whatever reason) of turning up late ourselves. It is unsatisfactory to insist on the prompt delivery of homework if it takes us weeks to correct it and give it back.

Being reliable in this way is simply a matter of following the old idiom of ‘practising what we preach’.

Teacher skills

As we have suggested, who we are and the way we interact with our students are vital components in successful teaching, as are the tasks which we are obliged to undertake. But these will not make us effective teachers unless we possess certain teacher skills.

Managing classes

Effective teachers see classroom management as a separate aspect of their skill. In other words, whatever activity we ask our students to be involved in, or whether they are working with a board, a tape recorder or a computer, we will have thought of (and be able to carry
out) procedures to make the activity successful. We will know how to put students into groups, or when to start and finish an activity. We will have worked out what kinds of instructions to give, and what order to do things in. We will have decided whether students should work in groups, in pairs or as a whole class. We will have considered whether we want to move them around the class, or move the chairs into a different seating pattern (see pages 40–43). We will discuss classroom management in more detail in Chapter 3.

Successful class management also involves being able to prevent disruptive behaviour and reacting to it effectively when it occurs (see pages 180–182).

Matching tasks and groups

Students will learn more successfully if they enjoy the activities they are involved in and are interested or stimulated by the topics we (or they) bring into the classroom. 'Teachers', I was told when I conducted my interviews (see above), 'should make their lessons interesting, so you don't fall asleep in them!' Of course, in many institutions, topics and activities are decreed to some extent by the material in the coursebook that is being used. But even in such situations there is a lot we can do to make sure we manage for the range of needs and interests of the students in our classes (see pages 14–20).

Many teachers have the unsettling experience of using an activity with, say, two or three groups and having considerable success only to find that it completely fails in the next class. There could be many reasons for this, including the students, the time of day, a mismatch between the task and the level or just the fact that the group weren't 'in the mood'.

However, what such experiences clearly suggest is that we need to think carefully about matching activities and topics to the different groups we teach. Whereas, for example, some groups seem happy to work creatively on their own, others need more help and guidance. Where some students respond well to teacher presentation (with the teacher acting as a controller), others are much happier when they investigate language issues on their own.

Variety

Good teachers vary activities and topics over a period of time. The best activity type will be less motivating the sixth time we ask the students to take part in it than it was when they first came across it. Much of the value of an activity, in other words, resides in its freshness.

But even where we use the same activity types for some reason (because the curriculum expects this or because it is a feature of the materials we are using), it is important to try to ensure that learner roles are not always the same. If we use a lot of group discussion, for example, we want to be sure that the same student isn't always given the role of taking notes, rather than actually participating in the discussion themselves. When we get students to read texts, we won't always have them work on comprehension questions in the same way. Sometimes they might compare answers in pairs; sometimes they might interview each other about the text; sometimes they might do all the work on their own.

Variety works within lessons, too. It is not just children who can become bored by doing the same thing all the time. Thus, although there may be considerable advantages in using language drills for beginner students, we won't want to keep a drill running for half an hour because it would exhaust both students and teacher. However, we might make a different kind of activity, such as a role-play, last for longer than this. A lot depends on exactly what we are asking students to do.
Where we are using a coursebook for a large part of the time, it is advisable to vary the ways in which we use certain repetitive activity types. Just because reading comprehension exercises always look the same in a book, for example, it doesn’t mean we always have to approach them in the same way. We will discuss ways of using and adapting coursebooks in more detail in Chapter 11.

Destinations
When we take learning activities into the classroom, we need to persuade our students of their usefulness. Good activities should have some kind of destination or learning outcome, and it is the job of the teacher to make this destination apparent. Students need to have an idea of where they are going, and more importantly, to recognise when they have got there.

Of course, some activities, such as discussions, don’t have a fixed end. Nevertheless, even in such circumstances, it will be helpful if we can make sure that students leave the class with some tangible result. That is why a summing-up, or feedback session at the end of a discussion, for example, is so valuable.

Teacher knowledge
Apart from the ability to create and foster good teacher–student rapport and the possession of skills necessary for organising successful lessons, teachers need to know a lot about the subject they are teaching (the English language). They will need to know what equipment is available in their school and how to use it. They need to know what materials are available for teachers and students. They should also do their best to keep abreast of new developments in teaching approaches and techniques by consulting a range of print material, online resources, and by attending, where possible, development sessions and teacher seminars.

The language system
Language teachers need to know how the language works. This means having a knowledge of the grammar system and understanding the lexical system: how words change their shape depending on their grammatical function, and how they group together into phrases. They need to be aware of pronunciation features such as sounds, stress and intonation. These different features of the language system are explained in Chapter 5.

Students have a right to expect that teachers of the English language can explain straightforward grammar concepts, including how and when they are used. They expect their teachers to know the difference between the colloquial language that people use in informal conversation and the more formal language required in more formal settings. They also expect teachers to be able to demonstrate and help them to pronounce words correctly and with appropriate intonation.

When students have doubts about the language, they frequently ask their teachers to explain things. They ask ‘What’s the difference between ... and ...?’ or ‘Why can’t we say ...?’ Sometimes the answer is clear and easy to explain. But at other times the issue is one of great complexity and even the most experienced teacher will have difficulty giving an instant answer. In other words, our knowledge of the language system may not be adequate for certain kinds of on-the-spot questions about subtleties. Moreover, sometimes the question is not especially relevant – it is a distraction from what is going on in the lesson.
In such situations, teachers need to be able to say things like ‘That’s a very interesting question. I think the answer is X, but I will check to make sure and I will bring you a more complete answer tomorrow’ or ‘That’s a very interesting question. I don’t want to answer it now because we are doing something else. But you can find the answer yourself if you go to this book. We’ll discuss it tomorrow’. Students will realise that these answers are perfectly appropriate when the teacher does indeed return for the next lesson with the information that they have promised. This will demonstrate the teacher’s knowledge of the language and reference materials. But if, on the other hand, we forget to find the information and never mention the question again, students will gradually start to think we just don’t know enough about the language to find what we are looking for – or that we just don’t care.

**Materials and resources**

When students ask the kind of complicated questions mentioned above, good teachers know where to find the answers. We need, in other words, to know about books and websites where such technical information is available. However, this is quite a challenge in today’s world, where the sheer number of coursebook titles released every year can sometimes seem overwhelming, and where there are quite a significant number of grammar books and monolingual learners’ dictionaries (MLDs) to choose from – to say nothing of the multitude of useful websites on the Internet. No one expects teachers to be all-knowing in this respect: what colleagues and students can expect, however, is that teachers know where to find at least one good reference grammar at the appropriate level, or a good MLD, or can direct them to a library or a website where they can find these things.

If teachers are using a coursebook, students expect them, of course, to know how the materials work. Their confidence will be greatly enhanced if they can see that the teacher has looked at the material they are using before the lesson, and has worked out a way of dealing with it.

**Classroom equipment**

Over the last few decades the growth in different types of classroom equipment has been incredible. Once upon a time we only had pens, board and chalk to work with. But then along came the tape recorder, the language laboratory, video machines, the overhead projector, computers, data projectors and interactive whiteboards (these are all described in Appendix A on page 252).

Some teachers are more comfortable with these various pieces of educational technology than others. This will always be the case. There is no reason why everyone should be equally proficient at everything. However, students will expect that teachers should know how to use the equipment that they have elected to use. Learning how to use various types of equipment is a major part of modern teacher training.

However, we should do everything in our power to avoid being overzealous about the equipment itself. It is only worth using if it can do things that other equipment or routines cannot. The essentials of good teaching – i.e. rapport, professionalism, using good activities – will always be more important than the actual means of delivery. What has changed recently, though, is that students can do things they were unable to do before thanks to technical innovation. Thus modern podcasts (downloadable listening which can be played on individual MP3 players) give students many more listening opportunities than ever before. They can also write their own blogs (Internet diaries) and put them on
the web. They can burn CDs with examples of their work and the materials used in class to take home when a course has finished. They can search for a wide range of language and information resources in a way that would have been impossible a few years ago.

As teachers, we need to do everything we can to keep abreast of technological change in educational resources. But we should never let technology drive our decisions about teaching and learning. We should, instead, decide what our learners want to achieve and only then see what kind of techniques and technology will help them to do this.

**Keeping up-to-date**

Teachers need to know how to use a variety of activities in the classroom, of course, but they also need to be constantly finding out about new ways of doing things.

A good way of learning about new activities and techniques is to read the various teachers’ magazines and journals that are available (see Appendix B on page 259). There is now a wealth of information about teaching on the Internet, too. Magazines, books and websites often contain good descriptions of new activities and how to use them. We can also learn a lot from attending seminars and teachers’ conferences, and listening to other teachers describing new activities and the successes they have had with them.

Two things need to be said about the various ‘knowledges’ we have been describing. In the first place, it is difficult for newly qualified teachers to keep everything in their heads at the same time as they struggle with the demands of a new job. Nevertheless, as they learn their craft, we would expect them to be hungry for as much knowledge in these areas as possible since this will make them better teachers. Secondly, this kind of knowledge is not static, hence the need to keep up-to-date. Things change almost daily. New books, classroom equipment and computer software are being produced all the time, just as teachers keep coming up with wonderful new ways of doing old things (such as grammar presentation or discussion activities). Staying in touch with these developments can seem daunting, of course, because of the pace of change, but it is worth remembering how deadly it would be if things always stayed the same.

**Art or science?**

Is teaching language an art, then, or is it a science? As this chapter has shown, there are good grounds for focusing on its almost-scientific attributes. Understanding the language system and finding the best ways to explain it is some kind of a scientific endeavour, especially when we continue to research its changes and evolution. In the same way, some of the technical skills that are required of teachers (procedures for how to do things, a constant attention to innovation in educational technology and materials design) need to be almost scientific in their rigour.

Yet teaching is an art, too. It works when the relationship that is created between teacher and students, and between the students in a group, is at its best. If we have managed to establish a good rapport with a group, almost anything is possible. We have discussed some of the key requirements in creating such a rapport, yet behind everything we have said lurks the possibility of magic – or a lack of it. Because the way some teachers are able to establish fantastic rapport, or get students really interested in a new activity may be observable, but trying to work out exactly how it was done or why it happened may be more difficult. In the same way, the instant decision-making we have been discussing can happen on supposedly
scientific grounds, but its success, and the creativity that can be unleashed, is often the result of the teacher’s feelings or judgment at that very moment. For as we have said, good teachers listen and watch, and use both professional and personal skills to respond to what they see and hear. Good teachers have a knack of responding by doing things ‘right’, and that is most definitely an art.

**Conclusions** | *In this chapter we have:*

- discussed the personality that teachers show to the students. We have said this has to be in some way different (and more ‘teacher-like’) from our normal selves.
- talked about the need for teachers to be both adaptable and able to perform different roles at different lesson stages.
- seen the necessity of creating good teacher–student rapport as a result of listening to students, respecting them and being totally even-handed in our treatment of individuals and groups.
- mentioned the need for preparation, record keeping and reliability.
- said that among the skills teachers need to acquire are the ability to manage classes, match tasks to different groups and circumstances, provide variety in lessons and offer students clear learning outcomes.
- discussed the knowledge that teachers need to acquire, including knowledge of the language system, available materials, resources and classroom equipment, and knowledge about the latest developments in the field.
- said that teaching is both a science and an art.