

Teachers and Learners

In this unit we will examine the qualities, roles and responsibilities of both teachers and students in the classroom.

Teachers



What makes a good teacher?

Ask this question to a number of teachers and students and you are likely to get answers that closely resemble the following:

- A good teacher should be kind and patient.
- A good teacher should really love teaching.
- A good teacher should be lively and entertaining.
- A good teacher is able to motivate learners.
- A good teacher has a good knowledge of his/her subject.
- A good teacher should have good rapport and interaction with the class.
- A good teacher should be able to involve all students equally throughout the lesson.
- A good teacher should be able to correct students without offending them or affecting their motivation.
- A good teacher should know students' weaknesses and try to give help and individual attention where necessary.

We can see that the first four examples above are concerning a teacher's personality, whereas examples five to eight are more of a reflection on the relationship between the teacher and the students.

So, what exactly does make a good teacher? A simple answer may be, a teacher that really cares about his/her teaching, but cares even more about the learning of the students.

The role of the teacher

In recent years there has been more emphasis upon 'student-centred' lessons, as opposed to 'teacher-centred'. The reality is that some stages of a lesson will be more centred on the teacher and others will be very much more centred on the students. This will largely be dictated by the type of activity concerned. If we are able to make these changes appropriately our effectiveness as teachers will be greatly enhanced.

During a typical lesson a teacher will have some, or all, of the following roles:

Manager or Controller

When teachers take on the role of a controller, they are effectively in charge of the class and of the activity in a way that is quite different from an activity where the students are working on their own, in pairs or as part of a group. The teacher would normally be standing at the front of the class giving explanations, reading aloud etc. Many very charismatic teachers are very comfortable with this approach as they feel that they are able to inspire the students. Many other teachers are not as comfortable with such a role as it places all the attention on the teacher and detracts from the students' own experiences.

Of course, as with other roles, the teacher as a controller has its place in the classroom but certainly shouldn't be overused.

Organizer

This role is one of the most important, as teachers very frequently find themselves having to organize students to do various activities. Often this will involve giving instructions, organizing students into groups/pairs, initiating activities, bringing activities to a close and organizing feedback.

It is extremely important that teachers are comfortable in this role, as chaos could be caused if students are not aware of the task, or how the groups are supposed to function.

Assessor

Students are usually very keen to find out whether or not they are producing correct English and this is where the teacher will need to act as an assessor, giving feedback and correction as well as evaluating and grading.

It is vitally important in this role that the teacher is fair and consistent with all the students as well as being very sensitive to the students' reactions and providing necessary support.

Prompter

There are times when students will lose the thread of what they are trying to say or become stuck for ideas. When this happens the teacher needs to decide what to do about it. Should the teacher allow the student to work it out for him/herself? Or should the teacher gently encourage the student along? If you choose the second option you are, in effect, acting as a prompter.

When prompting we want to help, but we have to be careful not to take the initiative away from the student. Therefore a great deal of sensitivity and encouragement is required.

At times we may also find ourselves prompting the students to use English and not their native language!

Participant

At certain stages of the lesson the teacher may wish to participate in the lesson as an equal, not as the teacher. There can be a number of reasons for this such as being able to liven activities up from the inside of the group as opposed to prompting from outside the group, or evening the number of students for pair work activities in classes with an uneven number of participants.

When participating it is important for the teacher not to dominate the activity or focus attention upon him/herself.

Tutor

Tutoring implies a more personal role for the teacher. This role will often be employed when students are working individually and need some guidance and support or when they are working in pairs and we stop briefly to give encouragement.

Again, care needs to be taken to ensure the teacher gives equal attention to all students and to avoid intruding too much.

Resource or Facilitator

The teacher devises activities that allow the students simply to get on with the process of learning a language for themselves.

There are many occasions when the teacher will wish to withdraw completely from the activity and leave the students to participate in tasks without any interruption or interference. The teacher still needs, however, to be available as a resource in case the students require any assistance or guidance.

When acting as a resource we want to be helpful and available but we have to resist the temptation to spoon-feed.

Model

The teacher, and particularly a native-speaker of English, is often the only source of real, live English the student has ever encountered. The teacher is the fount of all knowledge on English grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation, and in these areas they have particular responsibility and authority in the eyes of the learner. Many adult learners particularly want to benefit from the speech or pronunciation model that the teacher offers.

Observer or Monitor

Often during the course of a lesson the teacher will wish to monitor what is going on in the classroom. This can give the teacher information as to how long an activity is likely to take and how successful it has been. During oral communicative activities the teacher may also want to make notes for correction or praise at a later stage.

While observing it is important that the teacher generally maintains a distance from the students so as to not distract them from the activity that they are involved in, but there are occasions when the teacher may also need to move in a little, to hear spoken work or to look at writing in progress, in order to monitor effectively.

Which role and when?

The role that we employ is largely going to depend on the type of activity and what we wish the students to achieve. Some stages of a lesson will require that the teacher is more dominating or leading, while others will require a more withdrawn role. It is important that the teacher is able to switch between these roles appropriately and is aware of how to carry out the required role.

As well as having the attributes of a 'good teacher' and knowing which role to take and when, an experienced teacher will know how to involve and engage the students, how to effectively use mime, gesture and his/her voice. These are all areas that will be dealt with in Unit 3 – Classroom Management.

Learners

What makes a good learner?

When looking at learners of English we have to consider a number of factors, such as age, culture, language level and motivation for learning. Any of these factors could have a bearing on what we perceive to be a 'good learner'. However, there are a number of general characteristics that successful students appear to possess. These can include:



- A willingness to listen to the language.
- A desire to experiment with the language.
- A willingness to ask questions.
- An ability to think about their own learning process and methods.
- An acceptance of error correction.
- A desire to learn.

These are all qualities that successful learners usually have and it is the teacher's responsibility to encourage and foster these attributes in the classroom.

Age

Young learners or adults? It is important to define the difference between young learners and adults. Generally, *adults* is taken to mean those who are 18 years of age or more, and the term is fairly self-explanatory.

However, there are at least three categories of young learner.

First (and possibly the most difficult) is the post puberty or early teen age learner i.e 13-plus, who is often unmotivated, self-conscious and unwilling to take risks or experiment with language.

Second is the pre-puberty learner, corresponding to primary school or 8 to 12 years old, who are usually more receptive to the new sounds, words and grammar of a foreign language.

Finally, the very young learners, who are often pre-schoolers aged 7 years and less. These are becoming an increasingly bigger market the world over. They have shorter attention spans, and in the case of the very young ones have not even completely mastered the grammar of their mother tongue, but all are generally amenable to fun games, singing, drawing, etc.

Learning experience – Adults will usually come into a classroom for the first time with a long history of learning experience. They will usually have gone through a number of years schooling, as well as other courses. These learning experiences (both good and bad) will often cause them to have a fixed view of how teaching should be carried out. Adults also come with their own history of success and failure, which can influence their belief that they can succeed with the language.

Young learners, on the other hand, have also probably had some prior learning experience but it is unlikely that their views are as fixed and they are more likely to have an open-minded approach to new learning experiences and methods.

Motivation – Adult learners will usually have made their own decision to attend classes and as such will usually be quite motivated. Younger learners, however, have rarely made that decision for themselves and may be somewhat lacking in motivation. A caring teacher will help build and encourage motivation by making classes varied and interesting.

Nervousness – Adults are often more nervous about a new learning experience than younger learners. ‘Loss of face’ and anxiety about success are major factors here. It is important for the teacher to be gentle and encouraging while helping build confidence.

Language awareness – Adults usually want to be able to match new language to their native language and this can sometimes lead to problems. Younger learners are far more likely to be able to absorb language from context and usage in much the same way as they acquired their own language.

Behaviour problems – Adults have a greater attention span than younger learners and as a result present fewer problems for the teacher regarding behaviour and discipline. Discipline in the classroom will be dealt with in detail in unit 3.

Life experience – Adults naturally have more life experience to bring in the classroom and this can make the lessons more varied and interesting. It is also usually easier for a teacher to build rapport and have interesting discussions with adult students of a similar age.

Culture and first language

Different cultures have different approaches to learning. Students from certain Asian countries, for example, are often noted as being very serious about their learning and respectful to their teachers but sometimes lacking in creativity and willingness to communicate. The problem possibly stems from the fact that in these areas, the teacher is often still expected to do all the talking and the students are encouraged not to speak in class unless addressed directly by the teacher. In some schools TEFL teachers are sometimes frowned upon and some classes considered unruly because of the noise. (Inevitable and necessary when there is choral work or pair and group work!) Conversely, the popular opinion of Latin American students is the exact opposite. Students from different linguistic groups are likely to have very different problems with the English language. Good teachers should be aware of their students’ customs and differences that could affect the success of the classes.

Language level

Distinctions between different levels of ability in the English language clearly have to be made. The most common breakdown is as follows:

Beginners – From zero knowledge of English to a very basic knowledge of English which cannot be quickly or easily activated.

Elementary – Students at this level are likely to be able to form basic sentence structures and communicate on simple topics.

Low/pre-intermediate – Able to communicate and understand a greater variety of topics but lacking general fluency and depth of language awareness. Still likely to make many errors even with basic structures.

Intermediate – Able to understand and communicate on a wide range of issues using limited vocabulary store but still lacking in accuracy and fluency.

Upper Intermediate – Should be able to actively communicate on almost all topics using a greater range of language but still lacking in accuracy.

Advanced – Students should have a very good knowledge of the English language and now will be studying more subtle language items.

It should be noted that while the above terms are the most commonly used their actual meanings can differ considerably depending on where you work and which textbook you may be using, an elementary student in one country could be viewed as intermediate in a different country!

The Common European Framework recently established by the Council of Europe states the following 6 levels:

- Breakthrough, Basic User A1
- Waystage, Basic User, A2
- Threshold, Independent User, B1
- Vantage, Independent User, B2
- Effective Operational Proficiency, Proficient User, C1
- Mastery, Proficient User, C2

These broadly equate to the levels listed previously.

Teachers often have their own favourite levels. With lower levels success is easy to see and usually good fun. It may be a bit restricting, however, for the teacher due to difficulties the students have in communicating in English. Students at this level are not likely to ask too many complicated grammar questions and the teaching is mainly visual.

Mid-level students have already achieved a lot and success can be difficult to measure. To get to this level, students are usually motivated and the teacher is able to communicate with the students on a greater range of topics. Ingrained mistakes at this level can be difficult to iron out.

Higher level students already know a lot of English and are usually highly motivated. The danger is that they can sometimes feel that they have reached a plateau and fail to see progress. At this level the teacher needs to encourage students to take more and more responsibility for their own language learning.

Obviously our teaching and the complexity/speed at which we speak to our students will largely be determined by the level of the students in front of us. Many activities can be adapted to more than one level, but there are some which are patently more suited to one level. It would be rather pointless and

possibly patronising to give an advanced student very basic material. Likewise there is no sense in giving beginners activities which they have no hope of comprehending or completing!

Motivation

There are many reasons why students may have decided to attend your English class. Adult students will usually have made that decision themselves and so will have some degree of motivation. Some of the most common reasons for attending English classes are:

- For future career prospects.
- For travel purposes.
- To improve grades at school/achieve success in exams.
- To study or live in an English speaking country.
- To communicate with colleagues/friends/partners.
- Out of interest in languages.

Whatever the reason a motivated student has a greater chance of success than a student without motivation. The teacher has to ensure that lessons are enjoyable, interesting, varied and useful in order to maintain or build that motivation.

In conclusion

As can be seen from the above, the relationship between learners and teachers is a very important and complex issue. An enthusiastic, sensitive, motivated and caring teacher is much more likely to have successful students who enjoy their learning and continue attending classes. As a result we can say that a 'good teacher' will most likely have 'good students'!

Where you can, make reference to your own experiences as a learner and/or teacher, or to the experience of others whom you may have observed.

Once you have read and absorbed the information contained in this unit, open your worksheet, and complete it without referring back to the previous pages.

If you are not able to complete your answer sheet without looking at this unit, then the information has not yet been fully absorbed and you should read through it again.

